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OLD SOLITARY, THE HERMIT TRAPPER; OR, THE DRAGON OF SILVER LAKE.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "HAWKEYE HARRY," "BOY SPY," "IRONSIDES,
THE SCOUT," "DEATH-NOTCH, THE DESTROYER," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A NIGHT OF ADVENTURE.

It was a wintry night in the year 1846.
The brow of the heavens was moody and sullen.
Great volumes of dark, gray clouds lay piled in jumbled
masses against the northern sky, and from these, fleecy
shreds detached themselves and went trooping across the
heavens, trailing their tattered and torn fragments in wild
confusion through the air. A damp, chilly wind swept across
the plain, and rushed threateningly through the brown valleys
and forest aisles, moaning bitter stories of a coming storm to
the wildwood monarchs that stood writhing and shivering in
its breath.

HIS EYES FELL UPON SOMETHING THAT STARTED FROM OUT THE GLOOM TOWARD HIM—SOMETHING
THAT SENT THE BLOOD IN ICY CURRENTS THROUGH HIS VEINS.

Beneath that continent of clouds, the great prairie of the North-west lay, apparently tenantless in its murky gloom, its hills and valleys, its meandering streams and leafless mottes of timber, fading away into one dissolving view—that mysterious ocean of darkness—the boundary of the vision.

A broad waste of undulating prairie, stretching its unbroken length between the English river and Silver Lake, in the then territory of Iowa, lay in all the fullness of its autumnal grandeur and desolation, ready to receive the winter's offering that was gathering in the clouds above. It was a plain, whose continuation of gentle swells, or prairie waves, was unbroken inside of weary leagues, traveling westward from the English river.

But, despite the solitude and the threatening character of the approaching storm, life was abroad on that plain. Hoofed feet were pressing its soil and going in a westerly course in obedience to the guiding hand of a master.

It was a solitary horseman who was making his way across that plain, in the face of the gathering snow-storm. He was well bundled from the biting winds, in a wolfskin coat, buffalo over-shoes and a fur cap. The latter was drawn down over his ears, meeting almost with the upturned collar of his great-coat, and nearly concealing his face. A red woolen scarf encircled his neck, and its ends crossing on his breast, passed under the arms and were tied behind his back.

The animal he bestrode showed signs of exhaustion from long travel and the burden it bore. For, in addition to its rider, there were several large packs strapped to the saddle behind, while each side of the front bow was loaded to its utmost capacity.

Whether this solitary man was journeying was a mystery to all but himself, for the country to the westward, as far as the Missouri river, was the undisputed hunting-grounds of the various tribes of Indians that dwelt to the northward, and who regarded the pale-face intruders with hostile jealousy. His presence there might have been a strong argument in favor of his being in league with the Indians, had it not been for one thing, of which the stranger was evidently unconscious.

Far back upon his trail, and yet within sight of him, an Indian warrior was dogging his footsteps. He was on foot, yet he managed to maintain the same distance between the horseman and himself that he had gained hours before.

But not conscious of the spy upon his track, the rider pursued his lonely course, occasionally consulting a small pocket-compass to direct his bearings.

Now and then he scanned the clouded sky. He saw the dark gray clouds trooping across the heavens, and with an eager impatience he would apply the whip and rowl to his jaded beast, as if anxious to reach some point of safety and shelter before the storm came on.

As he rode on he at length noticed that it was growing darker and darker around him, and unpleasant apprehensions filled his mind. Night was near, yet he was far from the least cover that could afford him shelter.

He certainly had underestimated the distance required to complete that day's journey to reach the timber that bordered the western extremity of the plain.

A sense of fear was stealing over him. He was fully satisfied that the night would be one of extreme darkness; and what, with a blinding snow-storm beating around him, could he do upon that prairie?

He pressed on with all the speed that his jaded animal could muster. There was still a faint hope in his breast that he might run across a mottle of timber, one of those oases that intersperse these great prairie stretches.

As he journeyed on, he suddenly found these hopes realized to a certain degree, when he found himself in the midst of a sparse growth of burr-oak "grubs," as they are termed in western phraseology. These are small bushes, most of which are not over five feet high, and numbering about one to every square rod of ground. In the gathering twilight they presented a dense form, so thick and close were the stunted and stubby boughs upon them. Yet this sparse growth of "timber" held forth no inviting inducements as a point of shelter. At first he entertained a belief that it was the outskirts of a dense body of timber, but he found on riding on a ways that it soon terminated in the open prairie again. So, riding back among the burr-oaks, he dismounted with the determination of going into camp, for upon examination he found many of the oaks were dead—having been killed

by the annual fires that sweep the prairies—and being perfectly dry, would answer the purpose of fuel.

Stripping his animal, he tethered it with a lariat, so that it could crop the grass, which, though dry and brown, was readily eaten by the hungry, jaded beast.

From one of the bundles the traveler now took a roll of canvas, with which he proceeded to erect a tent. This he did in a speedy and novel manner; with a hatchet he trimmed all the branches from one of the oaks, leaving nothing but the body standing. This was to be used as the central pole, and having fastened the canvas around it at the proper distance from the ground, he stretched it out at the lower sides until it resembled a small cone, and fastened its edges down with slender iron pins driven into the ground. A small opening in one side served as the door, which was covered with a loose "flap" when closed for the night.

His tent completed, the traveler placed all his effects within it, then gathered from the surrounding bushes a goodly quantity of fuel, which he also deposited in his tent.

Before striking a fire, he reconnoitered his situation, for he could not convince himself that he was entirely free from danger. He found that the wind had suddenly changed from the north-west to the north-east—a freak very common in this high latitude—and now it brought to his ears a sound like the dashing of breakers upon a rocky shore. But the sound was very faint and was driven from his thoughts by a grand spectacle that was revealed before him.

A white curtain seemed to extend from amid the clouds to the earth, resembling a mighty sail crowded to its utmost, at times belying almost to the earth.

It required but a single glance to tell the traveler that it was a blinding cloud of snow sweeping across the plain. He could already feel the fine particles upon his hands and face, and he had barely time to enter his tent and fasten down the door-flap when the sharp click of the snow-flakes upon the canvas told that the storm was upon him.

He glanced out through a small rent to see how his horse was taking the driving storm, but the air was so densely filled with the flying seed as to render it totally impossible to distinguish an object a rod away.

Turning about, he proceeded to strike a fire. He arranged some of the fuel, already procured, in the center of the lodge. Then he took from an inner pocket a match, which he struck and applied to the pile.

A dull, blue light pervaded the gloom of the place, but, as the flames gathered strength, they shot their bright, ruddy rays into every corner of the lodge, and their warm, cheerful glow was felt in every fiber of the wanderer's frame. He removed his scarf, cap and great-coat, and laid them aside. His form and features were now more fully revealed in the ruddy glow of the fire.

He was a man not over eight-and-twenty years of age, and his features were that bright, intelligent expression so characteristic of mental and social culture. His hair and beard were almost black, the latter, however, being of but a few weeks' growth. His eyes were black, sharp and brilliant, but their lids wore a heavy, languid expression that was not natural, but was rather the result of fatigue, watching, and the want of sleep.

And now, as the stranger sat gazing reflectively into the cheerful fire before him, he would fall into a doze from which he would start at every wail of the wind without, and stare about him with that wild, terrified look that marks the fear of one who can hear in every noise, however slight, the subdued voice of a detective, the click of a revolver, or the stealthy clasp of handcuffs.

But surely that handsome stranger had no such fears. He surely was not a fugitive from the officers of justice, for his was not the face of a criminal. But why did he start, and manifest such restlessness of spirit and uneasiness of mind?

As the moments wore on, he finally shook off his emotions of fear and uneasiness, and drawing from among his effects a pair of saddle-bags, he took therefrom some provisions, with which he proceeded to feast his gnawing hunger.

After his repast had been concluded, he produced a pipe, and or the next hour gave himself up entirely to his companionship.

And all this time the snow was falling. He could hear its continuous click upon the sides of his tent, and in several places it was drifting into the lodge under the edge of the canvas.

CHAPTER II.

DOWN AMONG THE DEAD.

NIGHT had long since set in, and the gloom and storm were fearful. It was not so very cold but the snow was damp and heavy, and driving and whirling in every direction in dense clouds.

The wayfarer kept close by his fire, for a single glance out into the night and storm would send a chill through his frame. But at length the storm began to subside. The wind went down and the snow ceased to fall. Finally the moon, which was in the zenith, burst through the trembling clouds and flooded the plain with its mellow radiance, almost rivaling the light of day.

The man arose, and, opening the door of his tent, went out. A scene of dazzling brightness and glory met his eyes. The whole plain lay wrapt in a spotless robe of white, to which the moonbeams gave a luster of blinding splendor. So sudden had been the change of the weather, and the appearance of the plain, that the traveler felt that he had been suddenly wafted into a new clime. Not a breath of wind was stirring, and, although the air was crisp and bracing, it was not biting cold.

But it was not the plain, nor the dazzling beauty reflected from its mantle of snow, that held our friend—if such we may call him—entranced, but the pillars of snow that stood around him. Every burr-oak bush within sight of him was laden with snow. Not a limb or shrub could be seen, but each shrouded bush looked like a hewn shaft of marble, though there was a mystic grandeur about it, with which none but the hand of nature could embellish it.

None of these spotless columns were less than five feet high, and some reached to the height of ten feet. And while our friend stood within the silent forest of statuary, regarding each shaft with its bright, frosty sparkle, his eyes caught sight of a beautiful arch of snow, a few paces away, that set at defiance all the beauties of the dazzling white columns. But no sooner had he discovered it, than all the beauties faded from what seemed a wonderful freak of the storm, for he at once became cognizant of the fact that his horse was the support of that arch, being too tired and travel-worn to shake the icy cover from his back.

Advancing, the master soon brushed the snow from the animal's back and body; then, with his feet he scraped the snow away from around the bush so that the animal could lie upon the grass.

This act of kindness done, the man returned to his tent. He found his fire had burned low, and at once replenished it with fuel. He now began to think of lying down to get a few hours' sleep, the want of which was beginning to tell upon him.

It required but a moment to prepare a couch by spreading his great-coat and a woolen blanket upon the ground, reserving a couple of blankets for covering.

These preparations completed, he was about to remove his boots when his ears caught a slight sound without.

He bent his head in the attitude of intense listening. He heard his horse pawing the ground with a quick impatience. This, however, he accorded to its dislike of the crunching snow under its feet, and would have thought no more about it, had he not heard the beast give a loud snort.

This convinced him that all was not right, and, rising, he went out to see what was wrong. He saw his horse standing, with head erect, ears pricked up and nostrils dilated, as if with afright.

Quickly the traveler swept the surrounding prairie, but nowhere upon its white bosom could he see a single object, save the shadows cast by those frail pillars of snow. Still he knew the animal scented danger, but, as nothing was visible, he argued with himself that a hungry wolf must have been skulking therewith and frightened the horse. With this conviction fully impressed upon his mind, he again sought the cover of his tent and the cheery glow of his fire, only to be called out again, and that immediately, by another and more violent manifestation of affright by his horse.

He was fully satisfied that something was wrong, and he now made a more careful observation of his surroundings. Still he could see nothing but those ghostly shafts and their shadows. One of these columns, however, attracted more than usual attention from the traveler, for it suddenly occurred to him that it was closer to him than when he made his previous observation, and yet he was standing on

the very same spot. This seemed not a little singular, but the absurdity of the idea of its really being *nearer* to him, induced him to believe it was only imagination. And, without giving the column a second glance, he turned and carefully swept the plain around him.

But, despite his efforts to the contrary, his gaze was drawn back to that pillar of snow by some strange magnetism, and when his eyes rested upon it again, he started with an inward shudder of mysterious terror, for he actually saw the column moving!

A fearful realization rushed suddenly across his mind and to divert his suspicion he bent his gaze in another direction. Just then a solitary cloud flitted across the moon's disk, and trailed its shadow across one of the more distant columns of snow, but, instead of the shadow moving, it seemed to stand still, while the column appeared to be moving toward him. This he knew was not the case, but rather the power of imagery, and again the traveler reasoned with himself that it was upon the same principle that the other column had seemed to move. In order to leave no doubt, whatever, he resolved to advance and knock the snow from the bush that supported it.

It required but a few steps to carry him within reach of it, and then, with his booted foot, he gave the column of snow a heavy kick.

A low cry, as if of pain, issued from the snow pile; the snow was whirled in every direction by arms flung suddenly outward, and an Indian warrior, hideous with war-paint, stood face to face with the astonished, terror-stricken man.

He saw at once the cause of his horse's uneasiness, and that he was not in error when he imagined he saw the column of snow moving; for it was quite apparent, now, that the cunning savage had permitted the storm to weave a robe of snowflakes around him and in this manner of disguise had approached his tent. It was a cunning expedient, fully worthy of the subtle brain of an American Indian.

The hand of the savage rested upon the hilt of a knife, and the white man comprehended his danger at a glance, and, turning, he darted into his tent for a weapon with which he could defend himself.

The red-skin, however, seemed to divine his intention, and, with a fierce war-whoop, sprung after him.

Before the white man could get hold of his revolver, the savage grasped him. He turned and grappled with the red foe. Together they rolled to the earth. But the ground beneath them gave way, and, amid a cloud of dust and dirt they sunk down into the black depths of what seemed a hidden cavern.

The white man felt the savage tear loose from his grasp. He heard a low cry of sudden terror, mingled with the rattling of dirt above him. He knew, then, that the savage had broken away, and was climbing out at the hole through which they had fallen. This unexpected termination of his attack had filled him with terror, and before the white could regain his feet, the crafty foe had made his escape from the pit.

It required but a moment for our friend to gain a true knowledge of his situation. Fully one-half of the ground floor of his tent had fallen in, and he was standing on the bottom of a pit over ten feet deep. All of his bundles, his weapons, and half of his camp-fire, had been precipitated in a confused mass into the hole; and the first thing he did was to secure the smoldering firebrands from among his effects, place them in a heap at one side, and kindle them into a blaze. This occupied but a minute, and, as the flames grew larger and larger, and threw out their beams of light, he started with an exclamation of surprise.

He found he was standing in a cavern, whose extremities were lost in the darkness far beyond, and whose walls showed the rude handiwork of man.

The passage was narrow and about six feet high, and its walls testified to its having been cut through a strata of limestone. But, nowhere within sight of where he stood, did the earth above the passage appear to be as thin as the spot whereon stood his tent.

And now, as he gazed around him, all fears of danger departed. Something in this cavern filled his mind with that fascination which draws one on, even into unknown regions amid unknown dangers, to gratify a curiosity that is irresistible.

Under the influence of this fascination, our traveler took up a torch and set off to explore the cavern. As he advanced he noticed that there were numerous niches in the wall, and in one or two of these he found a stone hatchet,

some arrow-heads of flint, and other things that satisfied him the cavern was the work of a people of a remote period. Continuing on, he suddenly ran across a human skeleton, that caused him to start with the feeling which one experiences when he unconsciously treads upon a grave. Without a doubt, he was an intruder in the catacomb of the dead who may have lived far back in an age coeval with the Mastodon.

But it was too late to turn back now. The adventurer's curiosity was gaining strength, and he pushed on. But he was again brought to a sudden halt by another sight. It was that of the figure of a man, of the Indian race, seated in one of those little niches in the wall. His hands rested upon his legs, and his head was thrown back against the wall in an attitude of repose. He was entirely naked, and, in the glare of the adventurer's torch, his complexion appeared to be a dusky, ashen hue. By his side lay a tomahawk, knife and stone hatchet. He appeared to be seated there asleep, but, when our friend called to him several times without arousing him, he saw that he was not possessed of life, but convinced himself that he was an image of stone—left there to guard the dead.

The adventurer advanced closer to examine the grim figure more closely. He stopped and bent over it. There was something so lifelike in its appearance, that he could not resist the temptation of putting out his hand and touching it. A cry of horror burst from his lips as he did so, for, simultaneous with the touch of his finger, a current of air sucked through the cavern and the figure crumbled to dust!

What a mystery! There, for centuries perhaps, had that warrior sat, a mere handful of dust, retaining a lifelike semblance, waiting only for the touch of the adventurer's finger and that faint breath of air to destroy it forever.

What next? The adventurer asked himself the question; then, holding his torch above his head, he peered forward into the gloom.

He started violently. His eyes fell upon something that started from out the gloom toward him—something that sent the blood in icy currents through his veins.

It was an animal—a huge monster, not unlike the hooded serpent, with the rough, scaly folds of a fish. The great angular head, with its dark cowl, its open jaws and long, yellow tusks, was thrust upward almost to the top of the cavern. It stood in the middle of the passage, as if to dispute the further intrusion of the adventurer within the silent precincts of that ancient tomb.

The stranger had no desire to advance closer to the monstrous creature, for, as the rays of his torch, wavering and flickering in the currents of air that was drawing through the cavern, fell across the scaly monster, they told him that it was *aquiver with life!*

CHAPTER III.

OLD SOLITARY.

THE time and scene of our story changes.

It is autumn in all the fullness of its wondrous glory—the poet's ideal of this witching season. The forests still retain their livery of green and russet, and the broad, sweeping prairies lie clothed in their mottled hues of emerald and brown. The rivers and brooks are flowing on undisturbed by the icy hand of the frost king. Balmy zephyrs drift lazily and languidly across the plain, and ruffle, with invisible fingers, the dappled robes of the wildwood monarchs.

Voices are heard in the depths of the wilderness and upon the boundless ocean of prairie. But they are those mysterious voices of nature that come, as it were, from out the realms of Nowhere, thrilling the breast of man with the soul of romance and the mystic glories of the material universe.

Within its environs of brown hills and wooded banks Silver Lake lay like a great bed of molten silver, with the blue heavens reflected in its glassy depths. Flocks of wild geese, ducks and snow-white swans sported upon its bosom with as little fear as though its echoes had never been broken by the footsteps of man, nor shocked by the crack of a rifle.

From the northern extremity of this lake dense woods extended away for miles and miles, while from the southern shore a broad expanse of prairie rolled away for weary leagues into the hazy distance.

The wooded shore was rough and precipitous, and densely fringed with willows and water-elms. These trees and bushes courting the light and freedom of the opening, had grown outward over the lake, and while their tops had shot upward again, their under foliage had grown

downward, until now, in many places, the limbs trailed in the water. Under this green archway sported troops of muskrats, beavers and otters. At the southern side of the lake the banks, low and marshy, were lined with a dense growth of tall reeds and aquatic plants that extended several rods out into the lake. Through this forest of reeds the otters and other animals had cut clean passages which crossed and recrossed each other like the thoroughfares of a great city.

Near the close of day, toward the latter part of September, Silver Lake lay as tranquil, with flocks of fowls sporting upon its surface, as it had lain all day; and had a traveler happened there, he must have felt the exultation of an explorer, for there was nothing to indicate that the solitude of that lake had ever been broken by man. But whatever his feelings may have been upon a first impression, he soon would have been compelled to curb them; for, had his eyes been fixed upon the western shore near the southern edge of the woods, he would have seen a white puff of smoke shoot out from a clump of bushes, and, almost simultaneously, he would have heard the heavy report of a rifle come sharply across the lake.

Then, as a thousand wings beat the air, as the fowls arose from the water and circled away with screams and cries of affright, the observer would have seen a small canoe, with a single occupant, shoot out from the shadow of the western shore and head directly toward a wild goose that lay beating the water in its death throes.

The occupant of that canoe was an Indian warrior. He was painted and plumed in all the paraphernalia of the savage costume, and was armed with a heavy rifle of superior finish and caliber, a side tomahawk and scalping-knife. He was a noble specimen of his race, tall and well proportioned, with eyes like those of the hawk. His movements were easy and graceful, and as he drove his canoe outward into the lake, he plied the paddle with such skill that scarcely a sound was made.

It required but a few strokes to carry the feathery craft within reach of the dead goose, and reaching out the Indian lifted it into the canoe.

A smile of joy swept over his bronzed face, when, upon examination, he found his bullet had pierced the brain of the fowl, a feat of marksmanship, considering the distance, worthy of the praise of a Boone or a Crockett.

Heading his canoe to the west, he soon ran in under cover of the drooping foliage from whence he first appeared, and was lost to view.

Then followed another silence, only to be soon broken, however, by the footsteps of a white man, who came from the woods, and pausing on the bank, gazed out over the lake.

He was a man whose general appearance was calculated to enlist more than a passing notice, for he was a personage whose equal was seldom met with upon the border.

He was a man who bore the weight of fifty years as lightly as a youth of twenty. In fact, there was nothing to indicate to one that Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper, had seen two-score and ten winters but the few threads of silver among his dark-brown hair. He measured nearly seven feet in his moccasins, and was built otherwise in proportion to his height. Muscular and sinewy, without an ounce of superfluous flesh, he was a Hercules in point of strength, and agile and supple as the panther. His face was well covered with a rough, bushy beard, that was faded by the sun and tobacco-juice. His features were rough and angular, but wore a pleasant expression. His eyes were of a dark-gray color, keen as the hawk's, mild and innocent as an infant's, but withal, you could see the soul of rollicking mischief lurking within their depths, ready to burst forth in that vein so characteristic of this noted woodman.

He was dressed in a garb made after a style of his own, for oddity was one of his peculiarities, and he had a strong aversion to every thing tending toward the Indian fashions.

Around the shoulders was a cape of stiff, heavy elk-hide, and to this was attached equally around the edge, innumerable narrow strips of ribbons of some strong fabric, that reached to his knees. These being distributed equally around his body, were confined to the waist by a leather belt.

Beneath this gown of ribbons he wore a woolen shirt and buckskin trousers. As a protection to the cloth, the sleeves of the former were encircled in a spiral form by a narrow strip of buckskin, sewed to the garment.

But what was most peculiar about his dress

was its colors. Every thing, with the exception of his cap and moccasins, had been dyed a pale green hue. This he had done to avert a contrast of color while in the forest, and to blend his own form as much as possible with the green leaves and foliage. To this was owing much of his success as a trapper, for the beaver and deer, and also the Indian, could not detect his presence so readily, when the eye alone was depended upon.

He carried no weapons that were visible, with the exception of a long, heavy rifle, whose neatness showed the pride of its owner. A large powder-horn was strung at his side by means of a strap passing over his left shoulder.

The old trapper may have had other weapons about his person, but then he was one of the few of his class who did not believe courage and the power of intimidating an enemy, lay altogether in an ostentatious display of knives and pistols. This he had found, in a great measure, by experience, and although he made no personal boast of his courage, great strength and the fear with which he knew the Indians regarded him, he was fully aware of his success as a trapper, and the characteristics that had made him so popular.

As had become consistent with his nature through force of habit and long life amid the dangers of the wilderness, he made a careful survey of the borders of the lake, to make sure that no lurking red-skin was about. Finding the coast clear he stepped down to the water's edge and began moving around the lake, with cautious step.

As he neared a clump of willows overhanging the water's edge, a low, painful cry, suddenly issued from its depths. This sound was followed by a plashing in the water, and instead of halting to ascertain the character of the noises, Old Solitary glided into the bushes and in a few minutes appeared on the opposite side, with a lifeless beaver in his hand.

"Tickle my scalp," the old hunter said to himself, a habit which invariably forces itself upon one who has no companion but his own thoughts; "peltry-pickin' promises to be good this fall. But then it's been a splendid year for fecundation, and it's no more'n I prophesied; for the business 'll be good this fall; but then thar's one thing that I've noticed in the thirty years that I've been huntin' and trappin', and that is, whenever and wherever peltries are plenty, scalps are too—that is, the red-skins and white-skins will contend for the same ground, and the result will be contention for each other's hair. Now, like as not, thar will be a pack of loafin' varlets 'round this lake afore long, and if they do come, thar'll be a muss. I haven't lived here fifteen years to vacate at sight of a pack of ornery Ingins. No, sir! Atwit me and the great Giver of Life, I'll never quit these diggin's while my scalp's over a warm skull. But whar's the use of borrowing trouble? Thar may not be a single red-skin come about. I hope thar won't enny come, for it might go hard on the settlers down at Mount Prairie. Hullo! tickle my scalp if it ain't an otter, this time."

The last remark was induced by seeing an otter in one of his traps.

Securing the animal, he reset the trap and moved to the next. In the course of an hour he had visited all the traps set around the lake, and with the animals caught, he began retracing his footsteps toward the cabin.

He moved with a step as light and elastic as a youth, and the long strides which the length of his limbs enabled him to make, soon carried him to the summit of a bold, wooded hill overlooking the lake. Here he stopped, and turning, ran his dark-gray eyes over the lake, upon whose glassy bosom the shadows of evening were lengthening. From the lake he bent his gaze outward and swept the great prairie, that seemed like a mighty ocean charmed to sleep, when its billows were rolling high. Not an object was visible on its bosom, and turning his gaze, he swept the dark, green woods on the opposite side of the little lake.

Here his keen eye caught sight of a thin wreath of smoke drifting from among the tree-tops, and an expression of surprise and curiosity swept over his face on making the discovery.

Some one, he knew, was in the timber, and had gone into camp. It might be only a solitary hunter, and then he thought that his worst fears were about to be realized, and that it was a party of Indians come to hunt and trap about the lake. Then again, he thought it might be possible that it was a party of settlers from the settlement, a few miles east of the lake, come over to spend a few days hunting and fishing, as they had been in the habit of doing occasionally. At any rate, Old Solitary resolved

to know whether that smoke arose from the camp of a friend or an enemy, just as soon as he could deposit his game at the cabin; and turning, he hurried on.

In a few minutes he came in sight of his cabin. It was a structure of no mean dimensions, built entirely of logs and covered with clapboards. It was situated on a bold eminence entirely devoid of vegetation, and commanded a good view of the valleys around it.

A stone chimney was one of the accommodations of this solitary abode, and the old trapper was not a little surprised to see a dense column of blue smoke rolling from its top. He was satisfied that he had left no fire on the hearth, and so it argued strongly that some one had taken possession of his cabin.

Hurrying up the hill, he approached the hut, opened the door and strode into the apartment.

To his surprise and indignation, he saw a powerful savage warrior seated before a roaring fire on the hearth, smoking with as much calm and stoical indifference as though he had been seated in his own lodge. And what seemed the most singular piece of impudence to the old trapper, the savage scarcely deigned to notice him when he entered.

A single glance around the room, told our old friend that the savage had been taking great liberties with his things. Some traps, an ax and hatchet, and other articles that he had left, he saw were gone, and he was satisfied the Indian had taken them for some purpose, in which there was a hidden meaning.

As the old trapper continued his gaze about the room to see how far the savage's liberties had extended, his eyes fell upon his couch of skins in one corner of the apartment, and his heart gave a great throb, and his eyes glittered like steel, at what he discovered there.

CHAPTER IV.

GREAT WOLF'S MISSION.

DESPITE the fears that had been so suddenly forced upon the mind of Old Solitary by the discovery he had made, he permitted no look, word or action to betray his emotion.

He was satisfied, by the disdainful and insolent silence he maintained, that the savage was there with no good intentions; but, concealing his feelings of resentment from the red-skin for the liberties he had taken with his cabin, the old trapper said:

"Tickle my scalp, red-skin, if you don't make purty free with another feller's shanty."

"Ugh!" grunted the savage, as if somewhat exasperated at being disturbed, then resumed his smoking with sullen demeanor.

"I say, red-skin," continued the old trapper, "you've got considerable cheek 'bout you to go into one's cabin and make yerself at home. Who the dickens are you, ennyhow?"

The savage took the pipe from his mouth, and turning his head, gazed up at the trapper, as though he had just become cognizant of his presence.

"Who you?" he blurted out, in a contemptuous manner, speaking in bad English.

Old Solitary could scarcely suppress his emotions of resentment. He was sorely tempted to strike the insolent foe down, but not wishing to precipitate the crisis which seemed inevitable, he permitted his better judgment to decide his course, and to the savage's question he replied:

"I'm Old Solitary, you red tobacker-sign. I'm chief of this shebang, and would like to know what you are doin' here, and who you are."

The savage drew his blanket close about his shoulders, arose to his feet and confronted our hero.

He was a powerful Indian, fully as tall as the old trapper, with broad, massive shoulders, deep chest and long, muscular arms. He was, in every respect, the old trapper's equal so far as size and muscular development were concerned, and if age was taken into consideration, the Indian had the advantage, for he was in the very prime of life. His face was broad and sensual, and his features and low, retreating forehead portrayed a strong predominance of animality.

It was readily perceived that this Titan savage was possessed of a superabundance of self-conceit and arrogance. When he arose to confront Old Solitary, he drew himself up to his full height, and made such an ostentatious display of his powerful form as would of itself, as he believed, be sufficient to intimidate the pale-face trapper and command a more respectful recognition of his august proportions.

But, whatever his intentions and thoughts

were upon this score, his sinister, serpent-like gaze was met by the keen, bold eye of the trapper.

"I am Great Wolf," the savage said.

"Great Wolf, eh?" replied the trapper; "wal, I'm sure your havin' two legs, instead of four, doesn't hinder you from bein' as sneakin' as yer brothers with the four legs and bushy tail."

"Great Wolf has not come here to idle words with a squaw," the savage said, haughtily.

"So, so!" exclaimed the trapper; "then you're my enemy, eh, Mister Mahogany?"

"The Sioux have dug up the hatchet and taken the war-path. The pale-faces are growing bolder every day, because they are gaining strength, and will soon overrun our land, as they did the land of our forefathers."

The savage spoke English quite intelligibly, yet we prefer to render the substance of his conversation in our own words and language.

"Wal, Injin," replied the old trapper, "I think you've undertaken a job that will cost you a few scalps. There's a right smart sprinklin' of the whites hereabouts, and thar's plenty of 'long-knives,' or sojers, as we call 'em, within a day's ride of the lake. Now it strikes me under the scalp that you'd better trot home, tell yer folks to bury the hatchet ag'in, and mind their own business."

"Waugh!" ejaculated the savage; "the white Hermit talks as though he was a host. He is but a single warrior, not equal even to Great Wolf."

"Oh, what a bloat you are, Injin! You're big, I'll admit, but you're like a tent when the wind swells it up. Now, if you have any business to transact with me, do it at once and make yerself skeerce hereabouts."

"I've come on business to the Hermit Trapper. These woods and the lake are all the red-man's. He has permitted the Hermit Trapper to live here and hunt and trap for many suns, undisturbed. Does Great Wolf not speak the truth?"

"Not edactly, Mister Wolf. For I have a claim on these diggin's, which, in justice to yer scalps, you haven't disputed. Besides, you didn't say any thing about the traps you set of lazy louts stole of me on't."

"The Hermit Trapper is growing old. The winter of life has put threads of frost in his hair and weak babble in his tongue. He talks much and thinks little. But the word has come to our village that he has promised the pale-face settlers that he will be their chief and scout, and warn them of danger when danger is near."

"Well, whose business is it?"

"Is it the way to repay the red-man for his kindness?"

"Kindness!" sneered the trapper; "was it a kindness to steal my traps? Was it a kindness for you durned buggers to try to get my scalp over on Beaver Creek? Talk to me of kindness! If you hadn't been a pack of cowards, you'd had my scalp long ago."

"Age has made the trapper's tongue loose. It says many things that his mind knows nothing of; but, Great Wolf has come to him with a message from Black Buffalo, the great chief of the Sioux."

"Wal, chip it out. What's ole Buff got to say?"

"That the Hermit Trapper must leave our hunting-grounds."

"And you don't say so? Wal, if I refuse to go, what then?"

"The chief bade me bring the trapper's scalp to his lodge."

"You don't say! Did you tell him you'd do it?"

"Yes."

"And do ye think ye've got the muscle to lift Old Solitary's hair?"

"Great Wolf's strength is like the panther's. He can take the scalp of the Hermit Trapper."

"Ye can? Ah me, what a brick you are, Great Wolf. But, do you think you can take my scalp alone?"

"Yes; easy."

"So ye didn't bring any help with ye, eh?"

"No. Why should I? Great Wolf is not a coward. He does not fear an old man."

"Ye may not be a coward, Great Wolf, but you're an onmerciful liar."

As Old Solitary thus spoke, he thrust his hand into his bosom. He saw that the savage was determined to bring about a conflict, and he could no longer stay his emotions.

"Let the white Hermit beware," said Great Wolf; "the Sioux are on the war-path, and there is the result of Great Wolf's prowess and strength," and he drew from under his blanket three fresh scalps, which, from the color of the hair, he knew had belonged to whites, and held

them up before the trapper's eyes, evidently to provoke him to some act of violence.

But the trapper still maintained an attitude of silence, his hand still thrust in his bosom.

"Why does the Hermit Trapper not speak? Is he a coward?" the savage continued, following up the advantage he believed he had already gained. "He has called Great Wolf a liar; let him prove it, or he shall die."

Quick as the lightning's flash Old Solitary withdrew his hand from his bosom with his finger upon the trigger of a cocked pistol which he leveled at his couch of skins in one corner and fired.

A shriek of agony burst from the pile of skins. There was a wild upthrowing of a pair of savage arms; the skins were thrown aside, and the form of an Indian warrior, writhing in his death-agonies, was revealed to their view.

Old Solitary had discovered that a savage was concealed there, shortly after entering the cabin. From this he knew that Great Wolf was there for mischief.

The savage giant seemed thunderstruck by this sudden movement of the old trapper, and started back appalled. But this diversion lasted only for a moment. With all the demon of his savage heart depicted in his brutal eyes, he uttered a yell, and bounded toward the old trapper with a gleaming knife in his upraised hand.

CHAPTER V.

PRIDE HAS A FALL.

OLD SOLITARY was expecting this movement, and was prepared to defend himself. With his left hand he caught the descending arm of the savage near the wrist, and thereby arrested the blow aimed at his breast. Then, putting all his strength into the effort, the old trapper gave the arm of his antagonist a sudden "wrench," causing the giant's fingers to relax their grip upon the knife, which fell to the floor at their feet.

With a sudden movement of his foot Old Solitary brushed the weapon into the fire that Great Wolf had taken the liberty to kindle on the hearth. The savage saw that the least effort to recover the weapon might result disastrously to him, and so he attempted to grapple with the trapper. The latter, however, had no desire to close with him, having more confidence in the virtue of his fist than his science as a wrestler, and with one well-directed blow full in the face, he felled the savage giant to the floor.

But, quick as thought, almost, Great Wolf was upon his feet. Maddened by his repeated repulses, he made another desperate lunge at the old trapper, only to go down before another blow from the Hermit's sledge-hammer fist.

The trapper had now gained an advantage over the half-blinded foe, and for the next ten minutes he did nothing but knock the Indian down as fast as he could get up. The face of the red-skin was pounded into a shapeless mass, and the blood was pouring from his mouth and nostrils.

Then Old Solitary took a cord from a pin on the wall and proceeded to make his antagonist prisoner. This he found a difficult task, for the savage had not, by any means, been outwitted; however, after a sharp tussle, he succeeded in passing the cord—which had an eye on one end—around both of the Sioux's arms, then formed a noose by threading the eye with the other end of the cord, which he drew up until the arms of the savage were drawn together behind his back. His legs were secured in a similar manner, and the mighty Great Wolf lay as helpless, almost, as the dead comrade near his side.

"Tickle my scalp, Great Wolf, if this isn't a different view of the matter than what you had anticipated," the old trapper said, triumphantly. "You underrated my few gray hairs, my lark. I may not be as nimble as a cat, nor pliant as a willow, but I think I can strike hard enough to spread any Ingin's nose over his face, as you can bear witness."

"The Indian made no reply, but the withering look that he gave his foe was fierce and malignant, and told that his unbending spirit had not been, as yet, conquered.

"I know it's hard, red-skin, fur a big lummicks like you to have to keel under, but you brought it on yourself, and now you mus' grin and bear it. You came fur my scalp; now, how'd ye like to go back without even your own?"

There was a convulsive swelling of the warrior's great chest that told how hard he was struggling to keep down all outward signs of the emotions of fear and humiliation surging within him.

Drawing from his bosom a keen-edged hunting-knife, Old Solitary advanced, and bending

over the head of the savage, he grasped his long, flowing scalp-lock in one hand, while with the other he flourished the knife about the head in a menacing manner.

Whatever the warrior's inward emotions were the trapper failed in forcing an outward expression.

At length, with a sudden whirl of the knife he shaved the entire scalp-lock from the Indian's head without injuring the scalp. To the Indian, it would only have been an addition of physical pain to have taken his scalp, and would have heaped no more disgrace upon him than by the loss of his scalp-lock—an Indian's pride. This Old Solitary knew, and not wishing to scalp him alive, he did the next best thing, by cutting off his hair.

When this was accomplished, he took the dead savage from among the robes and laid him back to back upon Great Wolf. In this position he bound the dead warrior to the living. He then permitted the latter to rise to his feet with his lifeless burden.

"Tickle my scalp, if you arn't a handsome bird, Great Wolf," remarked the old trapper in a taunting manner; "hal hal! ho! if you don't trot along home purty fast, your peepers will close up till arter the funeral, for I see you've got 'em in mournin'. I'm a tuff ole boy, Ingin, as you doubtless know; still, I'll let you go back to your chief and tell him that, for reasons over which you had no control, you didn't git my hair, and left your own as a memento. Now, Ingin, trot outen this shanty and make yerself scarce in these diggins."

The old trapper opened the door, and permitted the defeated savage to pass out with his dead comrade lashed to his back. Then he watched him move down the hill, and disappear in the woods beyond the valley with a firm, unflinching footstep.

"To save trouble in the future, I'd ort to shot the big varlet," the old trapper mused, "but then I want him to feel the pangs of his defeat, and he'll be a good source to publish among his friends, the virtue that is in my fist. Still, I expect trouble. The devil is loose 'mong the red knaves, and I feel oneasy 'bout the folks at Mount Prairie. But I will run over now and see 'bout that smoke in the woods. It may be a party of Great Wolf's friends, and if so, I may have another visit soon."

Seizing his rifle, and leaving the cabin, he took his course in the direction of the lake. He moved with hasty footsteps, for by this time the shadows of night were gathering fast.

On reaching the summit of the bluff, from whence he had first discovered the smoke, he halted and swept his surroundings with an eagle-like gaze. Far across the lake in a timber, he saw through the gathering twilight the bright twinkle of a camp-fire. Simultaneous with this discovery he detected a vivid flash on the shore near the camp-fire, and a moment later the sullen crack of a rifle came across the water.

"By the holy pocus!" exclaimed Old Solitary. "The Monster of the Lake must be abroad to-night," and he moved rapidly down toward the lake, and was soon lost among the dense shadows of the woods.

CHAPTER VI.

MOUND PRAIRIE—ITS SETTLERS—AT THE LAKE.

THERE is sometimes a beauty, as well as an aptness, in the names applied by the earlier settlers of the West to the material objects of the universe. Like the red-man, they have given to the mountains, the rivers and hills, names that are in harmony with the spirit they suggest. This comes from a closer intercourse and sympathy with nature's varied features, each of which, to a lover of nature, speaks in silent eloquence.

Such must have been the feelings of the settlers residing some fifteen miles east of Silver Lake, when they bestowed upon their settlement the appellation of Mound Prairie. For here the prairie broke into a sea of low, gradual mounds, that presented an agreeable appearance to the eye, and gave relief to the monotonous sameness of the wave-like undulations of the plain.

These mounds, averaging an acre to their surface, covered a scope two miles wide by three in length. Through the center of this tract, a small stream wound its way with the sinuosity of a serpent; and small mottes of oak timber, called "oak openings," were interspersed thickly over the mounds; and in among the inviting shadows of these groves had the settlers erected their cabins.

The settlement, or rather the colony of Mound Prairie, numbered about a hundred souls. It

was composed mostly of families from Ohio. A few others, however, had joined the colony after its entrance into the territory, and as they had had some experience upon the frontier, their acquisition to the colonists' force was of great service to them, for, although the Government had purchased all that portion of the territory from the Indians, and had thrown it open for pre-emption, the purchase of the land did not insure peace to the settler. The tribe of Sioux and Arapahoes disputed the right of the Sacs and Foxes—of whom the purchase had been made—to the land; and as they had not been included in the treaty, they felt there were no restrictions that they were bound to respect. So they were permitted to remain in the territory, there being insufficient emigration at the time to warrant sending an army to drive them from the country.

It wanted an hour of noon on the day that the event transpired as narrated in the preceding chapter, when two maidens issued from one of the cabins of Mound Prairie, and sauntered leisurely down one of the pleasant avenues that lay between two small groves of stately oaks.

The eldest of the two was a woman of perhaps one-and-twenty summers. She was tall, queenly and graceful, with dark-blue eyes, soft and mild as a summer sky. Ethel Leland was not distinctively handsome, but was good-looking, and possessed of a gentle, winning way, that was far more bewitching to all who met her than all the beauty of a Venus. Among her male acquaintances she had many admirers, yet she was quite indifferent, for one of her gentle, impulsive nature, to their attentions. Some thought she was inclined to flirt, but it was because they did not know her heart as well as she did herself; and others prophesied that she and Captain Roland Disbrow would eventually marry.

Ethel was an orphan, and had been since she was a mere child, but she had been adopted by her father's dearest friend, Maurice Fayville. Mr. Fayville had cared for her with all the tenderness of a father. She had been educated and endowed with all the privileges of his own daughter, Mildred, whom we now find in Ethel's company, and whom we will introduce to the reader.

Mildred Fayville was not over seventeen years of age, with dark eyes full of the spirit of mischief; dark-brown hair, and a form sylph-like in its grace and beauty. Full of life and merriment, with a heart that had never known a moment's trouble nor sorrow, she was one in whom the spirit of joy and happiness was pre-eminent.

"Oh, Ethel!" exclaimed Mildred, enthusiastically, "are not Mound Prairie and these oak openings a perfect paradise?"

"It is very beautiful, Millie," replied Ethel, "but I do not know whether it will quite bear the appellation your enthusiasm gives it."

"I know I exaggerate sometimes, Ethel, but then it is my nature. I do love these groves and prairies, with their birds and flowers, and think one's heart must be very unimpressible if he or she cannot see any beauty in them."

"That is all owing to a poetical temperament, Millie, for, while some people can see nothing to awaken a passing interest in the commonality of nature's objects, others may become enraptured with the same. But, sister, should the reports that we hear nowadays—of coming trouble with the Indians—be true, how quick would all the romance fade from these openings! Every tree we would imagine concealed a savage, and every sound the stealthy footstep or subdued voice of a skulking foe."

"I hope the reports will prove to be without foundation, Ethel."

"We all wish that, Millie; but Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper, brought the news several days ago, and they say his judgment of such things is seldom at fault. However, he has promised to keep a watch upon the movements of the savages, and warn us if they are likely to make any sudden hostile demonstrations upon Mound Prairie. And I must say I do not favor the idea of the men going over to the lake on a hunting excursion."

"Why, Ethel, are you afraid the Monster of the Lake will catch your lover, Captain Disbrow?" and Millie laughed merrily.

"No, not at all, Millie," replied Ethel.

"Then you surely don't love Roland?"

"No, I cannot say that I do, but I admire him. He is gentlemanly and kind, though at times there is a reserved silence in his demeanor that I cannot understand."

"Well, I always supposed you loved Roland, sister, and would marry him some day."

"I could never love him, Millie, for my heart was given years ago to another, whom the cruel hand of fate took from me."

"You allude to Frank Hammond, do you not?"

"Yes."

"It always makes me shudder, Ethel, to think of that terrible Hart's Ford murder. Frank must have had a terrible heart to beat and mutilate a fellow-being as he did Henry Hohn."

"Yes, it was a terrible deed, Millie, and I can not help but think that Frank had help in that affair, if he had anything at all to do with it."

"The evidence was plain against him, Ethel; and without a doubt he committed the murder, or why would he have fled the country?"

"He may have had enemies that implicated him; but, be that as it may, with the brand of murderer upon him, I still love Frank Hammond."

"Your love for him must be of an extraordinary nature, Ethel."

"I admit it is, sister. It is a love that can never be supplanted. I may marry Captain Disbrowe, but it will only be for a home of my own."

"For a home?" asked Mildred, with apparent surprise; "have you not a home already, Ethel?"

"Yes, a good one, too; but I cannot always be dependent on the generosity of father Fayville."

"Tut! tut! Ethel; what will I do when you leave?"

"You will marry young Harry Thomas, and will be a happy little wife, living with the man you love."

Millie blushed scarlet, and her eyes drooped shyly; for, more than once, she had pictured in her mind the joy and happiness that would be hers when she became the wife of Harry Thomas, to whom she had already plighted her love.

"Ethel," she finally said, "it has been five years since the Hart's Ford murder. You were scarcely seventeen then, but in love with Frank Hammond, the murderer of Henry Hohn. Ever since then, the handsome, gallant Captain Disbrowe has been constant in his attentions to you, and yet he has not won your love from Frank. It is a singular case of love. Had he been your husband then, there would have been a difference."

"You have a wrong idea of love, Millie. One can love but once, if he or she loves truly."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Millie to herself, "but then there is a mystery connected with this love of yours, Ethel; there is a hidden secret in your poor heart, sister."

Millie was tempted to express these thoughts in words, and would probably have done so had she not heard footsteps approaching them.

"There comes Harry now," said Ethel; "he is coming to have a word with you, sister, before he leaves for the lake. So I will leave you with him, and return to the cabin," and before Millie could utter a protest, she turned and tripped away.

Harry Thomas, a fine handsome youth of twenty, and the lover of Mildred came up and joined his little sweetheart, and together they continued on among the tall oaks.

Ethel intended to return to the house, but before she had reached the door, a shadow fell across her path and Captain Roland Disbrowe was at her side.

"Ethel, my dear girl, I was just wishing for this opportunity," he said; "we are going to start for the lake in a few hours, and I want to speak to you on the subject which has been nearest my heart for five long years, and of which I have spoken to you more than once."

He drew Ethel's arm within his own, and together they walked out into the openings and seated themselves on a fallen log, beneath the green canopy of a wide-spreading oak.

Captain Roland Disbrowe was a man of, perhaps, thirty years of age. In form he was tall and commanding, and carried himself like one accustomed to military discipline. In feature, Captain Disbrowe was called handsome, though there was a little fierceness about his dark, piercing eyes. A very black mustache shaded his mouth and concealed the few traces of sensuality that hovered there.

Captain Roland Disbrowe was a man of the world. Early in life he was thrown upon his own resources, and by the time he was one and twenty he had picked up much information in the school of experience. He had given himself a liberal education and had traveled a great deal abroad in Europe, and had spent a few years in

California, where he had accumulated a supply of that convenient commodity known as "filthy lucre."

It was some five years previous to the opening of our story that he first met Ethel Leland, fell in love with her, proposed and was rejected. Ethel told him that Frank had won her heart. Disbrowe accepted his fate, but shortly after his rejection, Ethel's lover was compelled to flee the country on a charge of murdering a neighbor named Henry Hohn. About the same time Disbrowe enlisted as a soldier in the Mexican war, and when he returned three years afterward as Captain Disbrowe, he found Ethel still single, and at once renewed his proposal for her hand. Ethel declined to answer then, but he received encouragement enough to give him a hope of eventually being accepted by the fair object of his adoration.

About this time a colony was forming in the neighborhood for the Far West. Among those who had joined it was Maurice Fayville, and in order to be near Ethel, Captain Disbrowe became a member of the colony also, and it is two years later that we find them all located at Mound Prairie, in the flourishing territory of Iowa.

When their interview had ended under the oak, and Disbrowe and Ethel returned to the cabins, the face of the former wore a happy, joyous smile, while that of the latter was pale and sad—the index of a heavy heart.

This opposition of feeling arose from the fact that Ethel had promised to become the captain's wife at no distant day, and while he was happy over their betrothal, she was sad, for her heart was not given to him with her hand. She was only marrying for a home, for she was too proud-spirited to live dependent upon the generosity of Maurice Fayville.

When she found herself alone in her room, after parting with the captain, she sat down and wept bitterly.

"Oh! if I only knew," she moaned, "whether or not I will be committing a crime by marrying him! My poor heart can never stand this torture. Oh! Frank! Frank, my darling, if you are living come to me, for I know the stain of murder is not upon your hands! I know that you—"

Here her bitter thoughts were broken abruptly off by the sound of a stranger's voice in the adjoining room in consultation with Mr. Fayville. There was something about the voice that startled her, for it sounded frightfully familiar, and she bent her head and listened:

"When did you arrive in this country?" she heard Mr. Fayville ask the visitor.

"I arrived at Fort Dodge two days ago," the man replied.

"Well, I am glad to see you, old friend," Fayville replied, "but what has brought you so far from home?"

"Business! the same old business I always followed."

"Indeed?" returned Fayville; "but I hope you don't expect to find any roughs out this way?"

"That Hart's Ford murder is not given up yet, and I think after five years I am at last on the track of Frank Hammond, the murderer."

"Oh, God!" Ethel cried, wringing her hands in anguish, "It is Dart, the detective, and upon the trail of my Frank. Merciful Heaven, will those hounds of the law never cease hunting him down for a crime of which he is innocent?"

CHAPTER VII.

THE MONSTER OF THE LAKE.

EACH fall during the brief time that Mound Prairie had been in existence as a settlement, the settlers had been in the habit of going to the lake to lay in a winter supply of fish and wild game, such as the country afforded at that time.

On the day that we call the attention of the reader to this settlement, a party of six men left the place for Silver Lake. Among the number were Captain Roland Disbrowe and Harry Thomas.

They were all skillful hunters, and with the assistance of Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper, they had always been successful in their hunting excursions.

Three days later another party was to follow them with pack-animals to bring back the game.

Captain Disbrowe had been appointed leader of the hunting-party, not because it was necessary to have a leader, but that the direction of the party might be vested in one man, and thereby avert the diversity of opinions that generally arise in such a crowd, as to their movements.

The captain seemed unusually happy on this occasion, and left the settlement with a buoyant heart. His companions wondered at the change that had come over him, for they never dreamed but that he had been engaged to Miss Leland for years; and they would have been surprised had they known that, not until that day had the captain received the promise of Ethel to be his wife, at no distant day.

Not knowing this, however, his companions believed he was outgrowing some of those faults—for all men have their faults—in consequence of which he was losing favor in the estimation of some of the settlers. The captain had more than a usual amount of self-conceit, and in this he had been sustained, to a certain extent, by the settlers, who had put him forward on all occasions. From this he had been induced to consider himself an exemplary man, possessed of more than ordinary decision of mind, which placed him a grade higher than his fellow-beings. And the result of this self-esteem was an air of arrogance and vanity that soon had a tendency to discredit him in the estimation of some of the settlers.

But his acceptance by Ethel seemed to have infused him with a new spirit; and now, as they journeyed on toward the lake, his demeanor was such as to regain much of the lost favor of his companions.

I said there were six of the hunting-party. This was true so far as the hunters were concerned, but there were seven in the party. Jabez Dart, the Ohio detective, accompanied them, not because he expected to further his search for the agent of the Hart's Ford murder, but to satisfy his curiosity in regard to the Monster of the Lake, a terrible creature of the serpent species, that haunted the waters of Silver Lake.

The reports about this creature seemed incredible, but when they were confirmed by such men as Captain Disbrowe, Maurice Fayville and others of equal reliability, all of whom had seen the monster, there was no denying the assertions however improbable they seemed.

The dragon, as some termed it, was some ten feet in length, covered with huge scales, and shaped about the back like a fish. The head and neck, however, were those of a serpent, the former being rough and angular, with eyes deep-set and fiery.

From each side, wings like those of a vampire bat, put out near the middle of the scaly monster; but instead of being used to navigate the air, they were as propellers in the water like fins of a great fish.

This was the description of the monster given by Captain Disbrowe to detective Dart; and, as was natural enough, the officer's curiosity became aroused to the highest pitch, and he resolved to have a glimpse at the creature, so he accompanied the hunters with this sole object in view. At least, if he had any other object under consideration, his reserved habits as a detective held him silent.

The parties being well mounted, the timber bordering Silver Lake, which was only fifteen miles distant from Mound Prairie, was reached more than an hour before sunset; and pushing on through the wood, they finally reached the lake, the home of the mysterious Monster.

Here the party came to a halt, and dismounting, secured their animals and went into camp.

A favorable spot was selected, and a pair of small tents erected to protect the hunters from the chilly air at night, for the place was to be their evening rendezvous during their stay at the lake.

As it was too late to do anything that day in the way of hunting, the party concluded to spend the evening in watching for a glimpse of the Monster of the Lake. So a fire was struck, and Harry Thomas having been appointed to superintend the culinary part of the excursion, set about preparing supper.

This required but a few minutes, for they had brought a stock of cooked food with them. Each man was supplied with a tin cup from which he drank his steaming coffee as well as his punch, which was taken as an antidote to counteract the effect of the malarious atmosphere along the lake.

After supper, the party gathered around their fire, some indulging in pipes, and all listening to some of detective Dart's wonderful stories, the facts of which came to his knowledge while discharging his duty as a detective. The officer seemed perfectly at home among the hunters, for he had known most of them in Ohio, and the yarns that he spun held their attention so deeply enchained that they failed to observe that darkness had gathered around them.

At length, however, Dart ceased his stories to light his pipe, and during this interval of silence, Harry Thomas said:

"Boys, it's dark as pitch. Had we not better extinguish this fire for fear of danger?"

"Why so?" asked Dart; "are there hostile Indians about? or are you afraid of the Monster?"

"There may be Indians about," replied Thomas.

"There are, I am satisfied, no Indians in this neighborhood, gentlemen," said Captain Disbrowe, in a tone intended to settle that subject at once, and for all time.

"But isn't it about time we were looking out for that Monster?" asked Dart.

"Yes," replied Disbrowe; "we can conceal ourselves near the water's edge. The moon will soon be up, and then if the Dragon is abroad, we will be apt to see it."

So saying, each man with his rifle in hand, proceeded to a point where the lake shore was densely fringed with willows. Concealing themselves near the water's edge, they waited and watched in breathless silence for the Monster of the Lake.

An hour passed by. The moon came up and cast its mellow beams across the still waters of the lake. Far across upon the opposite side of the glimmering sheet, over a mile distant, the seven watchers could see the dark forest outlined against the clear sky like the dark range of a distant mountain. To the southward the water and plain melted away into a purple haze, while around them, all was darkness and silence—silence, excepting those sounds peculiar to the wilderness after nightfall.

Now and then they would see a solitary night-hawk skimming along the surface of the lake, or the occasional coruscation of a firefly within the belt of shadow along the eastern shore.

The longer the party waited the deeper the silence seemed to grow, and the fidgety little detective finally began to grow restless, and once intimated that he believed the hunters were trying to perpetrate a joke on him. But, the captain managed to keep him quieted down, and assured him that the Monster was no mythical creature.

As the moon rose higher and higher in the heavens, the shadows, cast by the trees along the eastern shore, crept slowly in toward the bank until there was but a narrow belt along the water's edge.

As the minutes wore away, our friends suddenly detected a faint plash in the water within the narrow belt of darkness, somewhere to the right.

All bent their heads and listened. They could distinctly hear a light plash of something in the water to their right, and from the sound, it seemed more like the dip of a paddle than aught else. However, they waited and watched. The sound seemed to be approaching along the shore under cover of the narrow belt of shadow.

At length they saw tiny waves chasing each other out into the lake, and heard them chafing the beach at their feet. Whatever it was in the water, it was hugging the shore closely, and seemed to be within a rod of them.

"It's it—the Dragon! the Monster!" whispered Dart; "shoot me if I can't feel its hot breath in my—"

He did not finish the sentence, for, at this juncture, a canoe, containing half a dozen hideous-looking savage warriors, floated out from the shadows into the moonlit waters within a rod of the group of watchers.

This unexpected sight filled the men with no little surprise and sudden fear, and despite their emotions, they maintained a breathless silence, for the eye of every savage was turned toward the shore and in a line with the camp-fire.

From this it became apparent why they were there. They had discovered the camp-fire, and were skulking around to obtain what information they could in regard to it, no doubt, with an eye to a few scalps, for they were in war-paint.

But whatever their intentions, they were, without a doubt, doomed to disappointment. For, while they sat in their canoe gazing shoreward, their attention was suddenly drawn in another direction by a sound in the water.

The settlers heard the sound also. It came from along the shore to the left, and was a noise similar to that of a shoal of fish passing over a shallow bar.

A low cry of terror pealed from the savages' lips, while the hearts of the white men seemed to cease beating, for, simultaneously, both parties saw, bearing down upon the savages' canoe with glowing eyes and flaming tongue, the Monster of the Lake!

CHAPTER VIII.

A BAND OF HORSEMEN.

OVER the great plain, and down toward the settlement of Mound Prairie, galloped a band of horsemen at a breakneck speed. Their half-nude forms, their painted faces and plumed heads told that they were a band of savage warriors with mischief in their hearts, for their faces were streaked and ringed with war-paint until they appeared like very demons of hideousness.

They bestrode strong-limbed mustang ponies, and were armed with rifle, tomahawk and scalping-knife.

They galloped furiously on until at length they gained the summit of a swell in the prairie, from whence Mound Prairie and the oak openings were just discernible away to the southward.

The Sioux chieftan drew rein, and his band, numbering a score and ten, followed his example.

"Look away yonder, my braves," he said, pointing toward the settlement, "you will see the wigwams of the pale-faces nestled in among the groves where the red-man used to take the deer."

"The scalp of a pale-face," replied a giant savage, "is worth more than the skin of a deer."

"Yes, yes, Great Wolf," replied the chief; "but we must not trouble the settlers there yet. We must have the scalp of the Hermit Trapper first, for he is a foe to be feared more than a score of the pale-face settlers. When we get his scalp, then will Waucosta lead his warriors upon Mound Prairie, for there dwells his heart in the breast of a pale-face lily, whose name is Mildred. And by her side grows a stately rose, whose name is Ethel, and who would make bright the lodge of Great Wolf. These flowers has Waucosta seen while lying concealed among the bushes in the Oak Openings."

"Waucosta is a great chief," returned the great savage giant, "it is because he has the heart of the red man within the breast of a white man."

There was a momentary silence, during which time the savages feasted their eyes upon the distant settlement like birds of prey gathering strength and courage to swoop down upon the unsuspecting quarry.

At length Waucosta headed his animal northward, and said—in plain English—which told that he was a white man:

"Let us push on for the lake and the White Hermit's scalp."

The whole party turned and rode away in single file, in a slow, easy gallop.

They rode on in silence for several hours, and at last the timber bordering on the lake burst upon their view.

Never halting they galloped on. They reached the timber. Here they slackened their pace, but continued on until they had reached a dark and densely wooded valley, a mile or more north of the lake, where they came to a halt and dismounted.

Hitching their animals under a dense clump of trees, the warriors gathered in a group near by.

"We are now less than an hour's ride from the wigwam of the White Hermit," said Waucosta; "does Great Wolf still say he will bear the message of Black Buffalo to him?"

"Great Wolf is not a coward. He has promised the chief to bear his message to the Hermit Trapper, and he will do it."

"Let Great Wolf be careful, for the Hermit is a powerful warrior," said Waucosta.

"And the strength of Great Wolf is like the panther's," said the self-conceited giant; "his equal does not walk these hunting-grounds."

"Then let Great Wolf be off for the Hermit Trapper's wigwam. Tell him that he must leave our hunting-grounds. If he refuses to go, bring his scalp, and then will Great Wolf have won the honors of a war-chief."

Great Wolf arose to go. He adjusted his weapons, some fresh scalps that dangled at his girdle, and drew his blanket close about his shoulders. All these preparations seemed to have been an excuse for delay. There was an air of hesitation about him, and his facial muscles moved and twitched as though he wanted to say something, yet was in doubt as to the manner in which it would be construed by his companions. At length, however, he said:

"There will be much plunder at the wigwam of the Hermit Trapper; had not a warrior better go with Great Wolf to help bring it away?"

"Yes; let Great Wolf pick his warrior," replied Waucosta, and the shadow of a smile hovered about his lips, for he saw that Great Wolf was afraid to go alone to the trapper's cabin.

The savage selected his companion—a small, wiry fellow, with eyes like daggers—and took his departure for the trapper's cabin.

While waiting his return, Waucosta and one of his warriors shouldered their rifles and moved away toward the lake in search of game for supper.

On reaching a point overlooking the water, they were not a little surprised to see a column of smoke drifting from among the treetops on the eastern side of the lake. They knew that some one, either friend or foe, was encamped there. But, as an Indian never permits himself to linger in doubt, the two began a careful reconnaissance of the vicinity.

Keeping within the densest portion of the woods, Waucosta crept toward the camp-fire, guided in his course by the ascending smoke. He moved on and on, and at last came in sight of the camp. He was not a little surprised to see seven white men seated around the fire.

As he ran his eyes hastily from face to face, an involuntary cry suddenly burst from his lips when his gaze fell upon the features of Captain Roland Disbrowe.

He apparently recognized the captain's face, and yet he scanned his form and features as if in doubt. But at length he seemed to have settled the matter of identity, and gave himself up to a moment's reflection, in which the evil workings of his mind were expressed by the nervous twitching of the facial muscles.

At length, as a grim smile that expressed some evil determination at heart, swept over his paint-bedaubed visage, he arose, and stealing his way back to where his companion was in waiting, proceeded with hasty footsteps to his camp in the valley.

His warriors saw at once, by the expression of his face, that his absence from camp had been attended with something of an unusual character; and in this they were not in fault, for, without questioning, Waucosta acquainted them with the discovery he had made of their close proximity to a party of bunters.

"When night comes and Great Wolf has returned, then will we go over to the lake and capture the pale-face bunters. But they must be taken alive. Let my braves all remember this."

A murmur of general satisfaction passed from lip to lip among the warriors, and their eyes glowed with a fierce joy in the eager anticipation of the coming night's work. With restless gaze they scanned the western sky. The sun hung just above the treetops. It would soon go down. Another hour and it would be dark.

But, ere half of that time had elapsed, a strange figure came from the gathering shadows of twilight, and paused in their midst.

It was Great Wolf, though his face was so disfigured that it could not be recognized. Only the tall form and peculiar clothing told them that it was Great Wolf.

The lifeless form of his companion was lashed to his back. His hands were bound, and his head shaven of its scalp-lock. His shoulders and breast were covered with blood, as was also the disfigured face.

"Good God, Great Wolf!" burst in profane English from the lips of the renegade chief, Waucosta, "what in the furies does this mean?"

"Behold the work of the accursed pale-faces," the savage giant muttered between his swollen lips.

"Pale-faces!" exclaimed Waucosta; "how more than one had hold of you?"

"Yes; as many as there are fingers on Great Wolf's hands," replied the savage.

A scowl of vengeance swept over the savages' faces, and Waucosta censured himself for not having gone in force to the trapper's cabin. But it was too late to make amends, and after Great Wolf had been freed of his lifeless burden, and his bruised and lacerated face anointed with the juice of a plant, noted in Indian surgery for its soothing and healing properties, he gave a well-constructed story of his adventure with overwhelming numbers of the foe. Despite the condition in which he appeared in camp, he succeeded in covering himself with more glory than if he had taken the scalp of Old Solitary, and in arousing the spirit of vengeance within the breast of his comrades.

Waucosta dispatched a messenger at once to Black Buffalo, with the news that the war had begun, and requesting that he send a reinforcement of a hundred warriors to the lake immediately.

The chief could scarcely restrain the emotions of his warriors, so fierce did they become with a feeling of vengeance; but as the shades of night were already gathering around them, they relapsed into silent wrath, and began their pre-

parations for departure to the hunters' camp by the lake, each one promising himself a scalp, in spite of Waucosta's injunction to take them all alive.

By the time darkness had fairly settled in the woodland, the savages were in motion, moving like so many grim shadows toward the lake.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD SOLITARY IN CAMP.

As the reader has doubtless inferred, the savages in the canoe upon which the Monster was bearing down, were a detachment of Waucosta's party under Waucosta himself.

In skirting along the lake shore in their endeavors to approach and surprise our friends, they had found the canoes lying beached under some willows. The presence of the craft there induced the chief to believe that they could approach the camp of the hunters by water with greater ease and caution than they could by land.

So with five of his best warriors, the chief embarked in the canoe, and coasting along within the shadow of the shore until he saw, from the light of the camp-fire reflected among the branches of the trees, that they were opposite the camp, he then permitted the canoe to drop out into the moonlit waters.

It was at this juncture that the red-skins discovered the approach of the terrible Monster of the Lake.

They had heard wonderful stories of this creature months before, from the lips of those who had seen it, but it had not occurred to Waucosta and his braves once since their arrival there, that Silver Lake was the home of the Monster.

They were, therefore, paralyzed with terror at sight of it; while upon the other hand, the band of whites had been expecting it, and were, in a great measure, prepared for the sight, though the creature was even more terrible-looking than it had been represented.

It was fully ten feet in length, and may have been many more, for from the middle of the body it tapered back like the tail of a serpent, and its rear extremities may have been under water. The huge, scaly body was more than half under water, while the angular, serpent-like head was thrust upward more than three feet above the surface of the lake. From the head downward the neck grew larger. It was arched like that of a serpent preparing to strike, and as it advanced toward the savages, its terrible jaws opened and closed, displaying a double row of long, white fangs, while the breath that issued from its throat seemed like puffs of hot smoke. Its eyes were deep-set, small, and glowed and scintillated like balls of fire—actually shooting out dull beams of light that reached the water before it. Short wings put out from each side of the monster, and lent an additional terror to its dragon-like appearance. But these wings were used as propellers, as a fish uses its fins, and much on the same principle that an aquatic fowl uses its web-feet in swimming. When the wings had spent their force against the water, they would close, disappear under the surface of the water, and instantly appear forward, when they would again spread out, strike the water like oars, and again disappear under the surface and appear, like a sudden flash, forward for a new stroke.

It was a terrible creature, and as it shot forward toward the savages, its breast cleaving the waves like a sharp prow of a boat, and the water fairly foaming in its wake, it was a sight well calculated to strike terror to the heart of the superstitious savage. Even the whites were held spell-bound with a species of wonder and horror, at sight of the wonderful Monster with its glowing eyes and yawning mouth.

Some of them clutched their rifles as if to shoot the dragon, while detective Dart, as if under the influence of some horrible fascination, glided to the water's very edge, and leaning forward, supported by a bush, gazed with starting eyeballs at the creature.

Waucosta being a white man, and possessed of less superstition than his savage comrades, recovered in a moment his sudden terror, and raising his rifle, fired upon the advancing monster. But his aim was unsteady, or else the creature was invulnerable to bullets, for it still came on.

Possessed anew with terror, the renegade chief seized the paddle and attempted to turn the canoe and seek safety in flight. But just as he had turned the craft in a course at right angles with that of the Monster, the breast of the latter struck the side of the canoe. There was a crash, the side of the frail bark craft was stove in, and the next moment the savages were

floundering in the water, while the Monster, sinking downward almost from view, glided away and was soon lost from the sight of our friends in the darkness along the shore.

It required but a minute for the terrified savages to reach the shore and plunge into the dense shadows of the forest, and then our friends realized a feeling of relief—relief from the terrible silence that had been imposed upon them.

"Ay, friend Dart," said Captain Disbrowe, "what do you think of that?"

"Quite a drama, quite a drama, Cap. Beats anything I ever saw; and demmy if it don't try one's nerves," replied the detective, betraying some excitement, which, however, seemed feigned. "That Monster is a terrible thing—a creature unknown to zoologists of this age. Quite a wonder, quite a terror. Ha! ha! but didn't it make those savages git up and dust?"

"Yes; it seemed to have a withering effect on their nerves," replied young Harry Thomas.

"I presume," said Captain Disbrowe, "they will not venture back in this neighborhood soon again; but, by Jupiter! we came within an ace of getting our hair lifted by those skulking rascals! But, then, a 'miss is as good as a mile,' so we may as well adjourn to our camp."

So saying, the party returned to the camp. The fire was replenished with fuel, and the little party again seated themselves within its cheerful glow. The Monster of the Lake now furnished a theme for conversation. The detective expressed his opinion freely in regard to it, and argued with ability that it was a species of the monster Saurians, such as those whose remains are found by geological researches in the Eocene Period, or Age of Reptiles.

And so the conversation ran on until the party were suddenly startled by the sound of footsteps and a strong coarse voice.

"Tickle my ole scalp, if you arn't a likely set of tars to have your scalps on, when the red hounds of Satan are swarmin' thick here-aways."

"Old Solitary, as I live!" exclaimed Captain Disbrowe, advancing with extended hand to meet the old trapper; "right glad am I to meet you—heavens, man! don't crush my hand in your iron fingers!"

"Wal, my boys," said the old trapper, dropping the butt of his rifle to the ground, and clasping his hands over the muzzle of the piece, which he leaned slightly forward upon, "what s'prises me is to see you squattin' here, in camp, with yer ha'r all on."

"I suppose our safety is owing to the Monster of the Lake," said Harry Thomas.

"The Monster! Whew! have you seen that critter to-night?"

"Yes," replied Thomas, "less than an hour ago."

"The dickens, you say! That Monster makes the ice rattle down a feller's back like rip-hullo! a stranger!" and for the first time the old trapper's eyes fell upon detective Dart.

"A friend of mine, Old Solitary, Jabez Dart, of Ohio, detective by profession," said Captain Disbrowe.

"Jabez Dart, de-tective, eh?" exclaimed Old Solitary; "glad to meet you, ole coon; give us a wag of your paw."

The detective advanced and acknowledged the pleasure of the old trapper's acquaintance in a cordial manner. They exchanged a few words, and then all the party but Old Solitary seated themselves before the fire again.

"Sit down, Solitary," said Disbrowe, "sit down and rest your bones."

"Nay, nay, captain; you never catch this ole carcass reposin' in ease when thar's kits of red-skins ravin' around like hungry coyotes."

"Why, Solitary, are the red-skins so thick in these woods?" asked the captain.

"Plenty as frogs along the lake. It war only a bit ago that I let the daylight out of one of the buggers, and spread the nose of another over his greasy phiz. Yes, boys, trouble may be expected from the Sioux now. Bullets and ha'r will fly like sand, and altho' I have no desire to have my meat-house punctured with a chunk of lead, I'll take my chances with the rest. No, the Sioux are not goin' to stand by the treaty of the Fox and Sac tribes, and are determined to make their vengeance felt fur not includin' them in the pow-wow. But, if deviltry's their game, scalps is my checker, and a high ole time we'll have."

"Truly, truly," said detective Dart, "you old codgers speak of killing and skinning Indians like beaver. Now, if it is fun, I wouldn't mind a short spell of it, for I'm old 'pizen' on a shot and lively times in general."

"Wal, now, Ole Pizen," returned the trapper,

with a pleasant chuckle, "if you love fun so well, jist come with me a spell, and we'll go and make a reconnaissance 'bout these diggin's afore we all indulge in too much carelessness."

"I'm your man!" exclaimed Dart, springing to his feet, and taking up the rifle with which he had been provided at Mound Prairie; "lead the way, Mr. Solitary, and if I git lost jist whistle."

"Whistle?" reiterated the trapper; "now Pizen, if you don't want to lose your ha'r, don't speak above a whisper arter we are outen sight of that fire. Mind ye; we can't go callin' to one another like a couple of children huntin' posies in the woods of Ohio. No siree; you must step like a cat, fur we're a couple of hunters, goin' out arter scalps."

"Lead the way, Solitary, lead the way," returned Dart, impatiently.

The old trapper took the lead, closely followed by the light-footed detective, leaving the other six seated before the fire, their sides convulsed with suppressed laughter over the trapper's advice and the blunt remarks of the detective.

The two moved slowly until some distance from the camp, when they quickened their footsteps, and, after journeying a couple hundred yards, they pushed their way through a dense thicket and entered a little glade, where it was so light that the rays of the moon seemed to have concentrated there in a focus.

Walking to the center of this opening, Old Solitary stopped, and, turning about, dropped the butt of his rifle to the ground, as was his custom when standing, and, gazing down upon the detective—who seemed a pigmy by the side of him—said, in a slow, decided tone:

"And you are Jabez Dart, the detective, eh?"

The detective made no reply, more than to draw a slip of paper from an inner pocket, and hand it to the trapper.

"Do you know that?" Dart asked.

The old woodman took the paper and gazed at the scrawling writing upon it, with that innocent, childlike ignorance of one who does not know one letter from another.

"Read it, Dart," he said passing it back to the detective; "then I can tell more about it."

Dart took the paper and read as follows:

"JABEZ DART:—Come at once to Silver Lake, in the Territory of Iowa, and you will hear something in regard to the Hart's Ford murder."

"OLD SOLITARY, THE HERMIT TRAPPER."

"That's it," said the trapper, "that's it."

"And now, what do you know about the Hart's Ford murder?" questioned Dart.

"Sh! silence! to the shadows! I hear footsteps!" demanded the trapper, and leading the way, they glided across the opening and into the deep shadows.

Here they listened. They heard the tread of a heavy foot.

"Is it a savage?" asked Dart, in a whisper.

"Not a bit of it, Pizen. An Injun walks like a cat, and wears moccasins, but that fellow treads like a buck, and's got boots on!"

"Verily!" returned Dart, in his careless manner.

"Yes, and tickle my scalp if I don't foller him, and see who he is, and whar he's goin'. Stay right here, Pizen; till I return."

"So, so—all right."

And Jabez Dart was alone.

CHAPTER X.

AN ARROW IN CAMP.

AFTER Old Solitary and Jabez Dart left the camp, Captain Disbrowe and his party relapsed into that ease and fearlessness that comes of a sense of security. For, since the old trapper had made his appearance at their camp, all dangers seemed to have vanished.

But this they soon found was really not the case. Something whizzed through the air and struck, with a dull thud, the tree trunk against which Captain Disbrowe was reclining.

"Indians!" involuntarily burst from the lips of one of the party, and the next instant every man was upon his feet.

Captain Disbrowe turned and saw, quivering in the tree within three inches of where his head had reclined, an arrow. The barbed point was half buried in the wood, and around the shaft he saw something like a piece of thin parchment carefully wrapped.

Snatching the arrow from the tree, the captain turned to his comrades, and said:

"Boys, let us fall back under cover of the darkness; there are Indians about, and this fire will tell them where to strike."

With rifles in hand, the hunters glided into the shadows beyond the radius of their firelight. Captain Disbrowe found that he was alone when

he had gained a point of safety, his comrades having taken a different course.

With the mysterious arrow still in his hand, he moved on until he had gained a little moonlight opening, where he stopped and examined the missile. True enough, he found the shaft had been wrapped with a gauze like strip of fine dressed buckskin, and on removing this from the shaft, he saw it was written on with red ink, or the juice of the wild grape, in a rude but legible hand, which he was enabled to read by the moonlight, and which ran thus:

"DEAR ROLL—Meet me forthwith on the peninsula, or north side of lake. *Fall not!* HULDY."

The captain started, and the hand that held the paper shook like an aspen. But why should he? Was the missive, couched as it was, in the language of a threat, addressed to him? Was "Huldy" known to him? Did he fear Huldy?

Be this as it may, he re-read the missive, then thrust it in his pocket, and, taking up his rifle, strode rapidly off through the woods. He shaped his course toward the lake, and in a few minutes reached its shore. Here he turned and proceeded along the bank toward the north.

Rounding the north-east angle of the lake, he soon came to where a high, narrow point of densely wooded land was thrust outward like a wedge into the clear lake.

In the center of this peninsula was a little glade, toward which Captain Disbrowe pushed his way.

He started suddenly back as he stepped into the moonlighted space, for he found himself confronted by an Indian.

"Let Captain Disbrowe have no fear," said the savage, in plain English, seeing the captain's sudden movement.

Disbrowe breathed easier and advanced into the opening.

"Is it possible," he said, "that I meet you thus—"

"Waucosta," interrupted the savage chieftain, for he it was, "call me Waucosta, for your old friend, 'Huldy,' you know, was murdered. Ha! ha! ha!"

"By Heaven! this beats me!" returned the captain.

"No doubt of it," replied the Indian, in a tone tinged with sarcasm, "no doubt of it. But time is precious, captain, and I want to have a talk with you about old times. You need not start, captain; no one will hear us."

"Say what you have to say, for I must return to camp," replied the captain, a little restless.

"Rest easy, captain; it's a long time till morning. I'm in a hurry, too, but it's no use to fret. But I suppose Ethel Leland is your wife, long ere this."

"No; she is single, and so am I."

"The Furies, you say! Honor bright, now captain?"

"I am telling you the truth."

"Well, that beats me. What is the trouble?"

"Ethel has been slow to forget her old lover, Frank Hammond."

"And is your prospect still dark?"

"No. I will wed her soon."

"Happy day!" exclaimed Waucosta, discarding his Indian ways, and deliberating manner of speaking. "I am glad to hear that, captain."

"Why? What is it to you whether I ever wed her or not?"

"Considerable. She has a sister, has she not?"

"How did you find it out?"

"I have been spying around Mound Prairie. I lay in the opening and saw Ethel and Millie sail by like birds of paradise, and says I to myself, 'Waucosta, with Captain Disbrowe's help, Millie Fayville shall be your wife.'"

"And suppose I refuse to give my help?" said the captain.

"Oh, but you will! I know you will, captain, after what I have done for you."

"I paid you well for it," returned Disbrowe.

"You think so, captain, but if you'd only known how I suffered that winter, five years ago, in crossing the prairies to the east of here, you'd see that I was poorly paid. I must have Millie—I will have her, and you, captain, shall do your duty."

There was a threat in Waucosta's words, the meaning of which Disbrowe did not comprehend, or else he dare not refute it. There was an acquaintanceship existing between these two men that was evidently fraught with some secret, which Waucosta appeared to wield with no little power.

After a moment's silence and reflection, Captain Disbrowe asked:

"What would you have me do, Waucosta?"

"Anything, Disbrowe, any thing, so I can get

Millie Fayville for a wife. When I think how nigh I came perishing in that snow-storm five years ago, in crossing the prairie, I think I am entitled to a purty little wife to make the remainder of my days happy and unshiny."

"I shall do nothing against your getting her if you can, Waucosta, nor will I do anything to help you get her."

"Eh? that's your decision, is't?"

"It is."

"Then, by go-mently, you hasn't enjoy the happiness of being Ethel's husband!"

"I have paid you for your silence once," replied Disbrowe, "and there should be honor, even among rascals—"

"Such as you and me, captain. Ha! ha! ha!" interrupted the renegade chief; "if you had never drifted into this country, captain, it's probable we'd never met ag'in this side of the brimstone pit; but as we have, I'd be a purty fool to let sich a chance fur a wife, as Millie Fayville is, go by, jist because one rascal said he'd do a favor fur another. Now don't you see my point, captain?"

The captain made no reply, but with the ferocity of a tiger he sprang at Waucosta and seized him by the throat.

"Curse you," he hissed, "I will strangle the life out of your body!"

Waucosta endeavored to defend himself, but he was no match for the enraged captain. In endeavoring to bear him to the earth, Disbrowe pushed the chief across the opening into the brush. Here he tried to throw him again, but the light-footed chief managed to keep erect.

Slowly Disbrowe pressed him through the undergrowth, until finally they stood on the edge of the precipice overhanging the lake. Here a desperate struggle ensued, but Disbrowe proved the victor, by pushing Waucosta over the precipice into the lake.

He drew a breath of relief, and advancing to the edge of cliff, gazed down into the water. He saw Waucosta struggling with the waves. He drew a pistol from the breast of his hunting-shirt, with the determination of shooting the renegade. He cocked the weapon and pointed it down at the chief. But he did not fire. At this juncture he beheld two small orbs of fire come into view from around an angle of the peninsula. He fixed his eyes upon these objects, and back of them, he beheld the dark scaly form of the Monster of the Lake, bearing, with swift wings, down upon the doomed Waucosta.

With a new terror—a conscience stained with crime—Roland Disbrowe turned and fled the spot.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAPTAIN'S TRIP TO MOUND PRAIRIE.

JABEZ DART waited and waited for the return of Old Solitary, until he finally began to think he never would come back.

But at length his patience was rewarded by hearing footsteps, and the next moment the old trapper was by his side.

"Back, are you?" said the impatient detective.

"Yes," replied the old trapper; "but I war detained longer than I expected to be."

"Well, what did you make out of that figure that passed us?"

"Siderable, Pizen, siderable. I've hearn lots and seen more since I've been gone. So I'll jist tell you what it war."

He leaned forward and whispered in Dart's ear, as though he were afraid of other listeners about.

A low exclamation burst from the detective's lips when he had concluded his story. They conversed a few moments longer, then returned to camp.

The hunters had all recovered from their fright occasioned by the stray arrow, and returned to the camp, with the exception of Captain Disbrowe. He was still absent, but came in soon after the return of Old Solitary and Dart, looking perfectly calm and self-possessed.

"Wal, Cap, what diskivery did you make?" asked the old trapper.

"The woods are swarming with Indians, and I would suggest that this camp-fire be put out, so that its lights will not make us such conspicuous marks for savage bullets."

"Good advice, Cap," replied Old Solitary, "and I'm afraid Mound Prairie will suffer for want of some one to keep them on their guard there."

"I was just thinking of that, Solitary, and I believe it would be well for me to mount my horse and hasten back to the settlement and put the settlers on their guard."

"I'd favor the idea, Cap," said the trapper,

and his words were repeated by every man present.

The captain waited for no further words upon the subject, but saddling his horse, he mounted and took his departure for Mound Prairie. He rode with all the speed of his horse, but did not reach the settlement until an hour after daylight the next morning.

He found the settlers all astir, and they were not a little surprised to see him there, his horse white with foam and panting with exhaustion.

"Why, captain, what is the matter?" asked Maurice Fayville, whom he chanced to meet first.

"The Sioux are on the war-path, Maurice, and I have come to put you on your guard. I left the other boys at the lake, where the red demons are swarming thickly."

"Great God!" exclaimed Mr. Fayville, "I hope we will not have to suffer the horrors of an Indian war!"

"The prospects are, alas! too favorable to believe otherwise, Mr. Fayville, but let us be prepared to meet the foe when he comes."

"Yes, yes, captain, that is true. Get the men all together soon as possible, and issue your orders for the defense of the place. On your shoulders, captain, hangs the military part of the preparations."

With this assurance Disbrowe went to work. A block-house, surrounded with palisades, which had been erected two years previous, was one of the strongest defensive features of the settlement, and this was put in readiness for immediate occupation, should the stern necessity of an attack require it.

The captain managed to keep himself busy all the time, though the responsibilities resting upon him did not require such active exertions. But then he had a motive in this. It was the hope of meeting Ethel Leland alone. He wished to have a talk with her, and, in view of the threatening danger, urge her into an immediate marriage with him, so that she would be placed more directly under his protection.

It was near the middle of the afternoon of that same day that he saw Ethel issue from the door of a neighbor's cabin and move away toward her own home. As her course lay through a small grove, he bent his footsteps in a direction that would enable him to intercept her in the heart of the grove, where his path crossed hers at right-angles.

As he neared the place of the anticipated meeting he was not a little startled by seeing Jabez Dart glide from a clump of bushes and confront Ethel. The maiden uttered a little cry at sight of him, but she soon calmed her emotions, and advancing, entered into a conversation with him.

Disbrowe stopped short. He was astonished, surprised, for he supposed Dart was still at the lake. He was where he could see them, and yet not be seen himself; and from the quick gestures of Dart, and the emotions of Ethel, he knew their interview must be one of an extraordinary nature.

A secret resolve possessed the captain. An uneasy conscience made him suspect something—he knew not what, and crouching down, he crept softly to within earshot of Ethel and Dart, just in time to hear the latter say:

"Now, don't forget. Look in the crotch of the hawthorn by the Crystal Spring about dark, and you will find a letter there, perhaps."

So saying, Dart moved away, and Ethel resumed her homeward course.

Disbrowe's mind was too deeply involved in thought to follow either his betrothed or the detective. But their conduct seemed very strange, indeed. There was a bit of a mystery connected with it, and in his heart he resolved to know what secret the hawthorn would have to reveal about dark.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE BAR.

As soon as Captain Roland Disbrowe had left the hunters' camp, Old Solitary ordered the fire to be put out and a change of location.

"Thar's slathers of red-skins about, boys, and we've got to be keeful," he said, "or some of us will lose our ha'r afore mornin'. They've got their eyes on this spot, and will keep 'em here jist as long as we stay."

"Where would you advise us to seek new quarters?" asked Harry Thomas.

"Wal, on the south side of the lake thar is a small sand-island that would be a good point to guard against the varlets. If you want to go over to it, I'll bring one of my canoes around while you fellers take your hosses and hide 'em in a new place."

"We'll do it, Solitary," said Ishmael Graves, "for I don't care 'bout losin' my skulp."

"Wal, move yourselves brisk. You will find me with the canoe whar the prairie jines the woods."

So saying, the party proceeded to strike their tents, pack them on the horses and move them to another point.

Something like an hour was consumed in making this change, and when the hunters reached the spot designated by the old trapper, they found him there with a large canoe.

"Now, lads," he said, "you fellers can take this craft and steer for the bar."

"Are you not going with us?" asked Thomas. "No, siree; I'm goin' to keep on the tramp round this lake, and I want Old Pizen to go with me."

"I'm your man, Cap," said Dart.

The old trapper now gave our friends such directions as would enable them to reach the island, or sand-bar, without trouble. Then, having cautioned them of the dangers that surrounded them all, he pushed the canoe off the beach, and the next moment they were gliding out into the lake.

The old trapper and Dart now turned and plunged into the woods again.

There were but five of the hunters now, and under the circumstances they felt greatly the need of the experience that enables the practical borderman to detect danger and elude it.

However, they felt satisfied that, when once upon the island, their danger for that night would be over with, for an Indian could never reach them unobserved when there.

In a few minutes' paddling a dark object, lying upon the glassy bosom of the lake, appeared before them, and they knew then they were nearing the sought-for place of safety. And to reach it, land, and beach their canoe was but the work of a few minutes' further time.

They found the bar a small, oblong strip of yellow sand, its surface in the middle being scarcely a foot above that of the lake. It was entirely barren of vegetation of every kind, and there was not an object upon it large enough to conceal a rabbit. From this destitute state of the island, our five friends knew at a glance that no enemy could possibly be concealed upon it. However, had they been experienced bordermen, they would, from force of habit, if from no other cause, have made a careful examination of the island before they could ever have felt themselves safe. But as soon as they had landed they began preparations for getting a few hours' sleep. The canoe was drawn from the water on the south end of the bar. Some blankets brought along for the purpose were placed upon the ground for couches, and upon these four of the hunters threw themselves and were soon sound asleep, for they had grown weary with the night's excitement and adventures.

The fifth one of the party was placed on guard, to be relieved in the course of an hour. The first watch fell upon Harry Thomas, and with good cheer he took his station. For awhile he walked to and fro across the island to keep himself awake, but everything had become so supremely silent that he convinced himself that all danger for the night had passed, and so he seated himself on the south end of the island to wait till his watch was over. The first thing he did on assuming this new position was to note the amount of territory over which he could command a view, and he found that the lower his eyes were the better he would be enabled to see objects on the lake. As not a living object was to be seen, he bent his ear and listened. Nothing was to be heard, save the heavy respiration of his companions and the water gently chafing the beach.

With these renewed evidences of their safety, Harry relapsed into quietude of mind and body, and soon weird visions were flitting before his eyes and wild fancies crowding his brain. He was growing drowsy with slumber, and would have soon been sound asleep, had the far-off report of a rifle, as it came across the lake, not broken upon his ear.

He started to his feet. He ran his eyes over the lake like one bewildered. He missed the respiration of his comrades. He took in his surrounding at a single glance, and a cry of horror burst from his lips.

Before him lay their canoe, but his companions were every one gone!

Where were they? What had taken them away so silently—yea, mysteriously?

While he was asking himself these questions, an additional horror forced itself upon him, by

making the startling discovery THAT PART OF THE ISLAND WAS ALSO GONE!

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD SOLITARY IN A "FIX."

AFTER they had seen the hunters off for the island, Old Solitary and Jabez Dart made their way along the lake shore toward the north.

They had gained a point nearly opposite that where the hunters' camp had been when they came to a halt near the water's edge. Here the old trapper produced a succession of sounds similar to many of those of nature that can be heard in the forest after nightfall. He gave no reason to his companion for his actions, but soon the light dip of a paddle was heard to the right of them, and the next moment a canoe with a single occupant came in sight from the distant shadows. As it came nearer and nearer Dart saw that the occupant was an Indian—that his plumed head was bent in the attitude of listening. Old Solitary continued his calls until he saw that the Indian had headed his canoe directly toward them, then he ceased and advanced closer to the water's edge.

Dart now saw that the trapper's calls had been intended for the Indian's ears, for he—the Indian—came on and landed where they stood.

"Ay, you are here, Lone Heart," the old trapper said, familiarly.

"Lone Heart heard the Hermit Trapper's calls, and came to meet him."

"Right glad I are of it, Lone Heart. This is my new friend, Jabez Dart, Ingin."

Dart greeted the Indian with a cordial shake of the hand, expressing the pleasure it afforded him in making his acquaintance, a stereotyped form of his that had originated from force of habit.

The only manifestation on the part of the Indian was a good-natured "Ugh," though he gave the detective a keen, searching glance as he took his extended hand. But owing to the shadows that concealed the expression of the Indian's face, Dart failed to observe this look of apparent distrust.

The meeting was followed by a momentary silence, which, however, was broken by Dart.

"I must say you fellows understand each other all-fired well," he remarked. "I presume you are in caboots, friends—partners, eh?"

"No," replied Old Solitary, "we're not in caboots, but we're friends. I live alone, and so does Lone Heart, but we meet often."

"But why is it that you're alone, Lone Heart? Hain't you no friends?"

"I am a Chippewa," replied the Indian, "and the Dacotah is not a fit companion for the Chippewa. My tribe are dead, and I am alone and sad at heart. There is no enjoyment for Lone Heart."

"Well, that's bad, red-skin. I sympathize with you. But I believe, if it were me, I'd let the Monster of the Lake gobble me up, and be done with life and sorrow."

"The pale-face speaks not from his heart. He knows not how dear life is, even to a poor Chippewa."

Here the Indian turned away, with an unmistakable air of contempt and offended dignity.

"Old Pizen," said Old Solitary, addressing the detective, "if you'll just remain here a minute or two, while I take this Chippewa to one side and instruct him a little, I'll be much obliged to you."

"Certainly, certainly," replied Dart, wondering what secrets there could be between the two.

The old trapper and the Indian withdrew a few paces into the woods and held a low conversation.

When they returned the Indian entered his canoe and at once took his departure. When he was out of sight Old Solitary turned to Dart and said:

"A curious Ingin, a curious Ingin. But a better heart never throbbed within a red-man's breast."

"Where does he live?" asked Dart.

"Anywheres. He's bunkin' round this lake now, and helps me some, now and then, with my traps."

"Ah, ah!" exclaimed Dart, "how dull and stupid I am. Exactly, I see into it now. But, Solitary, had I better carry any news to Mound Prairie to-night?"

"Yas. I guess you'd better go down, Pizen, though that's not much of consequence to report. I believe, and so does Lone Heart, that Waucoosta, the Sioux chief, is the very lad we want to make a point with. The Monster of the Lake came plaguey nigh gobblin' him onc't to-night."

"Been bad for us if he'd got killed," replied

Dart; "but suppose I go to the settlement, what shall I report?"

"Progress," returned Old Solitary, "and if I can git my clutches on Waucoosta by to-morrow night, I think we'll be all set. However, keep cool as a mountain-top. Don't let the settlers know but what you're up here. See the gal in secret and appoint a place where she can receive another communication by to-morrow night."

"All right, Solitary. I'll work the matter up to a demonstration, bet your head on that."

They talked on a few minutes longer; then Dart left the old trapper and proceeded to where their horses had been concealed. In a few minutes more he was on his way to the settlement.

Old Solitary, when left alone, turned and proceeded a short distance along the shore, when he came to a point where he had concealed one of the many canoes he kept at various points around the lake.

Pushing the craft into the water, he embarked therein, still keeping a northerly course and well in under the shadows of the bank and its fringe of forest trees.

He handled the paddle with a silence that evinced his skill in water-craft, scarcely creating a sound that was audible to his own ears.

He continued on until the circuit of the lake had gradually bent his course due west, then he ran inshore with the intention of landing; but, just as the prow of his canoe touched the bank, his practiced ears caught the sound of voices calling, in a suppressed tone, to each other from the depths of the forest. They were not far away, and served to change the old trapper's intention of going ashore there. So he again headed his canoe westward and continued on, still hugging the shore closely.

At length he came to the little peninsula upon which Waucoosta and Captain Disbrowe had had their fierce altercation. As it shot straight out into the lake, it made an abrupt angle in his course, changing it southward.

The peninsula was principally a deposit of limestone rock, covered with a layer of soil that had given nourishment to trees, shrubbery and grass upon it. In some places the banks arose to the height of twenty feet, and were either perpendicular or jutting, and their facade was covered with a dense network of vines, and festooneries of a species of Spanish moss.

In skirting along the base of this peninsula, the old trapper was brought to a sudden halt by the fall of a pebble in the water from the cliff above.

"Ah!" he said to himself, "it must be Lone Heart. He was to drop a pebble in the water if he wanted me above, and there was danger below. Ah, there goes the pebble again."

The old trapper was satisfied that his friend, Lone Heart, was on the rock above, for, on parting a short time previous, Old Solitary had promised to meet him there upon the edge of the peninsula, or under its jutting cliffs, within the next hour.

Lone Heart had informed him that danger lurked about the peninsula, and that he would determine their point of meeting by the magnitude of their peril. If he was wanted on the peninsula, a pebble was to be dropped in the water as he passed along, but if wanted below, a low whistle was to be the signal.

To assure himself that he had heard the fall of a pebble, he waited until he heard the sound repeated the third time. There was no doubt now of his friend being above on the cliff, and, as a double assurance of this, the light dip of a paddle drew his attention to a canoe approaching him from the south along the edge of the peninsula. It hung so close in under the dense shadows of the ledge that it was just discernible, and he could faintly see the outlines of three or four shadowy forms seated within it. These he knew were savages, and their presence there was probably known to Lone Heart, who had, in consequence, signaled for the trapper to meet him above.

Quickly realizing the danger that menaced him, Old Solitary attached the painter of his canoe to a strong vine, then rising to his feet, he began looking for some way to ascend the face of the rock.

The dense, black canopy of a branching elm overhanging the edge of the cliff, shut out all upward view. He could see nothing of his friend above, nor the chances offered for ascent by the vines that curtained the face of the rock. But while he was thus debarred from the assistance of his friend, as he believed, and a knowledge of the face of the rock by the blinding darkness, he felt in no manner deterred in his speedy escape from the approaching Indians. But, reaching up, he grasped hold of the vines,

and was about to risk his ascent thereby, when he felt something drop on his shoulder. He knew at once it was a rope of bark lowered by Lone Heart to assist him in his ascent, and releasing his hold upon the vines, he grasped the rope, and, hand over hand, began climbing upward with a cat-like celerity that was remarkable for one of his years and weight.

He had made more than two-thirds of the height of the rock, when the sudden crack of a rifle, almost under him, pealed out upon the silent hour. It was the same report that aroused Harry Thomas from his drowsiness and dreams over on the island.

Old Solitary stopped in his ascent. He would have sworn it was the crack of Lone Heart's heavy rifle, and he knew he was seldom at fault in such things. But there was a bit of mystery about it. Either the rifle had fallen into the hands of the Indians under the ledge in the canoe, or else Lone Heart was not on the rock above!

For the first time the old trapper was in a dilemma. Hanging as it were between heaven and earth, and knowing not which way to go—whether up or down—to keep out of the clutches of an enemy, was the situation in which he found himself.

He gazed up and then down, but the shadows concealed everything from view, and he was compelled to let his hearing decide his course. He listened intently. He could hear the soft crunch of a footstep on the cliff above, and below he could hear the quick dip of a paddle. Neither of these sounds, however, were sufficient to decide his course. He was satisfied that there were Indians below, and since he had heard that rifle report, the conviction flashed over him that there were Indians above. But he would have to go one way or the other, and that soon. His grip upon the slender rope was slowly relaxing.

Of the two dangers, he concluded to choose what he believed would be the lesser, and so continued his ascent. His head soon appeared above the rock; his shoulders followed. But now he hesitated. An agony of suspense seized upon him. He strained his eyes through the gloom. He saw a number of shadows dart out from the darkness. He heard the rush of panther-like feet. He felt a dozen hands grasp him, he felt a noose encircle his form, and the next instant he was lying upon the peninsula a helpless prisoner.

CHAPTER XIV.

VANISHED IN THE AIR.

THE forest became hideous with the demoniac yells of savage triumph when it was announced that Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper, was a prisoner. The announcement was first made by his captors, and as their cries ran through the woods and over the lake, they were taken up and re-echoed by savages under the ledge, savages in the forest, savages on the lake, savages everywhere.

In a few minutes the peninsula was literally swarming with Indians. More than a hundred fierce, vindictive warriors were crowding and jostling around the helpless trapper, eager to inflict a blow or taunt upon him. The presence of so many Sioux was evidence itself that another large party had followed Waucosta there that same day.

This old trapper was dragged to the little moonlit glade where Waucosta and Roland Disbrowe had met a few hours previous. Here the moonbeams enabled the savages to look upon their captive foe. But this light was insufficient to show the expression of the trapper's face, for thereon did they expect to read the shame of his defeat and the magnitude of his fears. So several small fires were lighted on the outer circle of the glade, and as they grew larger and the flames leaped out, sending their red beams of light into the darkness around, it revealed to the old trapper's eyes a sea of dusky, half-naked forms seething and writhing about him, their faces fierce with indignation and malignant scowls. But he met their sinister glances with a firm, unwavering gaze.

The bold defiance increased the revengeful fury of the savages, and they endeavored by many cruel blows and kicks, to force from him some word of fear; but they failed repeatedly, and finally subsided into silent rage.

This, now, was the old trapper's moment to follow up the advantage he had gained over the foe, and in a cool, defiant tone he said:

"You blasted red imps, why don't you go on with your infernal tellerin'! You needn't stop on my account. I've hearn sneakin' coyotes snarl and snap afore."

The old trapper was bound to a stake that had

been driven in the ground near the center of the glade. His hands were fastened at his side by cords passing around his arms and body. His feet were tied so that he was enabled to make a short step, and given rope enough to enable him to move three or four yards in any direction from the stake. He stood erect when he spoke, his head bare, and the bosom of his hunting-shirt laying open, showing the strong, massive chest that was rising and falling under the emotions that were surging like an internal fire within. As he concluded his defiant remarks, a savage pushed his way through the throng and confronted him.

It was Waucosta. He assumed an attitude intended to inspire the old trapper with awe of his august presence. But the captive still maintained his composure, and, much to the surprise and indignation of the chief, he said:

"Wal, now, old blatherskite, what have you to cackle?"

"The Hermit Trapper's words are bold, but his heart is wild with fear."

"The deuce you say! That's curious, now, ain't it?"

"Let the Hermit Trapper beware. He is talking to Waucosta, the Sioux chief."

"Indeed! Then you're the dog of that old rascal Black Buffalo, eh? Wal, you're a fine-lookin' cur, Waucussy."

"The Hermit Trapper is an old fool."

"Sneakin' dogs bark when their master has treed the bear."

"The pale-face compares himself to a bear, but it took himself and several friends to defeat Great Wolf."

"That's an impertinent lie, Waucussy; I licked that hound pup, Great Wolf, myself, and let the daylight outen his friend. I can rub a dozen of your skunks into a grease-spot in a jiffy, any time."

At this juncture there was a slight commotion among the savages at one side, and the next moment Great Wolf pushed his way through the crowd and confronted Old Solitary.

"Ho! ho! ho!" roared the old trapper, "tickle my scalp, Injin, if you ain't got an ugly countenance. Your eyes are a leetle bunged. You must—"

"The Hermit Trapper can sing his death-song," said Great Wolf, "and not idle words."

"Oh, yes! I remember you now. You're the chick I licked over at the cabin. But, Injin, you know it was a fair fight, now, wouldn't it, say?"

"Did the Hermit Trapper fight Great Wolf alone?" asked Waucosta.

"You bet I did, Waucussy. I wouldn't want help to wallop sich an ole, luberdy cuss as Great Wolf."

"Is this true, Great Wolf? Did you not say that the Hermit Trapper and his friends beat you?"

"I did. The Trapper Hermit lies."

There was a sudden heaving of the trapper's great chest, a flash of the eyes and a convulsive movement of the whole body. The bonds that bound his arms were snapped asunder by the one mighty effort, and with one well-directed blow he felled Great Wolf to the earth.

"How's that for a rejoinder, my fine bird?" the old trapper exclaimed.

Great Wolf, indignant with rage, sprung to his feet and shot toward the trapper, only to go down beneath another blow.

By this time the other savages, fearing the old trapper might escape, began closing in upon him. But the demon had been aroused in the old trapper's heart, and he plied his sledge-bammer fists in the faces of the savages with such telling effect, that, for awhile, he held them at bay. But he was finally overpowered, borne to the earth and rebound.

A short consultation was now held to make some disposition of the old trapper. Waucosta favored his immediate execution. Others were in favor of taking him to Black Buffalo, but the odds were against the latter proposition, Great Wolf included in the number, and so the immediate execution of the captive was decided on.

This settled, the mode of execution was next discussed; but in this there arose a difference of opinion from which neither would yield, and after a warm discussion it was decided to allow Great Wolf to fix the manner of the old trapper's torture. They had an object in this; smarting, as the giant savage was, with the pale-face's blows, they knew he would have no mercy in his selection from the catalogue of Indian tortures.

Death at the stake, with some slight modifications of 'his ancient' mode of torture, was the fate that the savage giant fixed upon for his hated foe. In fact, his burning brain could in-

vent nothing that would be more torturing than fire.

It required but a few minutes for fifty warriors to gather dry brush and twigs from the woods, and pile it in a circle about the old trapper. A space of about twenty feet in diameter was thus inclosed. The stake to which the old trapper was bound stood in the center of this circle, and, before the fire was applied to the brush, the rope that bound him to the stake was lengthened out so that he could walk about over the whole of the inclosure.

The captive noticed all his preparations for his execution with unwavering glances. At times his bearded lips would curl slightly with derision, then again his bold gray eyes would snap and glow with a merry twinkle, as if in bold defiance to all his enemies' power.

Once Great Wolf, who was watching the trapper narrowly for some sign of fear, caught his bearded face twitching with suppressed laughter, and said:

"Pain will soon move the face of the pale-face. When the red flames lick his cheeks, he will not laugh. He will beg for mercy, but the ears of the Sioux will be deaf to his cries."

"The deuce you say! Ah, me, *won't* that he bad? But, see here, you bunged-eyed, bloated-faced varlet, afore I feel the flame lick my cheeks, your scalp shall hang at my girle!"

The savages seemed awe-stricken by these words; or, not the words either, but the tone in which they were spoken, and the look that flashed in his eyes. But they soon recovered from their surprise and went on with their preparations for the torture.

At length all was in readiness, and the torch applied in a dozen places around the circle of brush.

The twigs were dry as tinder, and in a moment the whole space was encircled with a red sheet of hissing, roaring, crackling flame.

Old Solitary stood within his fiery circle, still undaunted—his face wearing that same calm, defiant expression.

The savages formed in two circles around the fire. The inner circle was armed with tomahawks, and the outer circle with knives. They stood prepared to strike the foe down should the flame sever his bonds and he attempt to escape.

Higher and higher rose the flames about the trapper. His clothing began to smoke with the heat that was growing hotter and hotter within that red, roaring hoop of fire. Twenty feet above his head the heat created a kind of vacuum in the air into which the flames rushed, converging into an apex, and the whole mass of fire forming a huge pyramid of flame. And in the center of this still stood the dauntless trapper.

From the apex of this pyramid of flame blue smoke and hissing sparks were whirled and shot upward into the air as though they had been vomited from the crater of a volcano.

It was a grand as well as a fearful spectacle. That roaring pile of flame and that double line of painted, demoniac faces peering into it, and rendered ghastly and spectral in the wavering light, was a scene that no pen can describe.

The flame concealed the form of the trapper from view, but they knew the air within that circle would soon become heated and burst into a flame. Then would the trapper's groans peal forth, mingled with the roar and crackle of the fire.

The moments passed by, and yet, to the surprise of the savages, no cry issued from the flames. The brush burned gradually out and the fire grew smaller. Here and there gaps were made in that red circle of flame and the savages enabled to see within the inclosure.

They started, and a cry of terror pealed from their lips. Mysterious awe was written upon their painted faces.

They saw Old Solitary was gone! He was missing from the circle of fire. No one had seen him leave, and in their superstitious hearts they believed he had vanished into the air, amid the smoke and flame. This, however, was impossible; but he was gone, and his absence was clothed in a profound mystery.

CHAPTER XV.

SAVAGE CUNNING.

WHEN Harry Thomas discovered, on arousing from his half-slumber, that his friends were all gone, and that a part of the island had also disappeared, a feeling akin to horror crept over him. He thought his own negligence, perhaps, had something to do with the disappearance of his friends. His first conclusion was that they had been drowned, for they had gone to sleep on that portion of the island that had evidently sunk beneath the waters of the lake.

What he should do he could not tell. Like one bewildered, he stood and gazed around him, and over the lake with a feeling of horror and desolation. A savage yell came faintly to his ears from the northern side of the lake, and aroused him from his stupefaction of awe to a true sense of his own peril. He started, grasped his rifle, and ran his eyes over the lake with a keen, searching glance.

Far out upon its glassy bosom, over twenty rods from where he stood, he saw what appeared to be another sand-bar. He fixed his eyes upon it with a steady gaze, and as they became more accustomed to the object he saw it was a sand-island. And, what seemed the most singular about it was, that he could see the dark forms of four or five persons lying upon it, plainly outlined against the white sand.

What did it mean? Our young friend cudgled his brain for an answer, but the more he thought over the matter, the more perplexed his mind became.

Still he kept his eyes fixed upon the bar. He saw that the dark figures upon it did not move, but he suddenly came to the startling conclusion that the island itself was moving!

To assure himself of this fact beyond a doubt he sighted an object far beyond, and in range with the island; then with steady eye he watched the line, and saw that the island was actually moving.

Something of the real state of affairs now rushed across the young hunter's mind, and for evidence of his suspicion, he turned to the north side of the island, and began examining that portion from which a part of the whole had so mysteriously disappeared. He found depressions in the sand that convinced him that a flat-boat, or raft, had been lodged against it quite recently. And he now had every reason to believe that the raft, or boat, whichever it was, was there when they landed; and so cunningly covered with sand as to appear, to one a stranger to the place, as a part of the island itself. In fact, there was not a single doubt of this being the exact nature of the whole case.

The savages apparently suspecting that the young hunters would flee to the island, to spend the remainder of the night, had preceded them there with a float of logs, which they had moored at the end of the sand-bar, and covered so cunningly as to appear the driest part of the island. Where the Indians had concealed themselves was a mystery. However, had the hunters been experienced bordermen, they would never have permitted themselves to be caught in such a trap.

Harry Thomas was totally ignorant of the number of savages engaged in towing his companions away. But he was a brave youth, and resolved to save his friends at all hazards.

Fortunately, the canoe had not been taken away with his sleeping companions, and in this he could embark to their rescue.

It required but a moment or two to launch the craft and enter it. Then he took up the paddle, and sent the bark flying over the glassy surface of the lake toward the floating island.

When within two rods of the raft, he permitted his canoe to come to a stand, so that he could ascertain, if possible, the direction from whence he might expect trouble, and its probable magnitude. But to his surprise he could not see a single savage, nor from whence the floating raft received its motive power. He could see, however, that it was moving, but so slowly that there was no danger of its motion disturbing the sleep of the four hunters.

Harry placed his rifle in a position to be readily grasped, then plied the paddle again. The canoe shot forward under his vigorous strokes, and in a minute its prow touched the raft.

It had been his intention to arouse his friends from their sleep by a vociferous shout, but as he saw no sign of savages, even when the raft was reached, he concluded that as great a silence as possible would be more appropriate.

So he reached forward with his paddle, and touched one of his companions, whom he succeeded in arousing with repeated "punching" in the back.

The fellow arose to a sitting posture, yawned drowsily, and began rubbing his eyes and muttering to himself in an incoherent tone.

"Sh, Burt!" cautioned Harry, touching him with the paddle. "We're in great danger."

Burt Stanley started up wide awake, and in a minute Harry succeeded in getting him to understand the critical nature of their situation. No time was to be lost, and Stanley turned, and arousing his companions, hurried them and their effects into the canoe.

Harry Thomas at once plied the paddle, and sent the craft back toward the island. Burt ex-

plaining to them as they went the nature of the danger from which they had been so opportunely saved by Harry.

They had not made more than half the distance between the island and the raft, when they happened to glance back and saw three Indians standing on the latter, gesticulating in a violent manner. Where they had been concealed, unless it was under the raft, they could form no idea.

Some were for firing upon the savages, but others objected, and they pushed on toward the sand-bar. They were within fifty yards of it when they made another startling discovery. A party of savages had taken possession of the island during Harry's absence, and a short distance north of this they saw two canoes loaded with warriors bearing directly down upon them at a rapid speed.

"Boys!" exclaimed Harry, "the red devils are after us three to one! We will have to fly and seek safety in the reeds along the south side of the lake."

"Yes, yes," responded one of his comrades; "head thereaways quickly, Harry, quickly!"

Harry headed the prow of the canoe southward, and plied the paddle vigorously. He was greatly assisted by his companions, who used the butts of their rifles as paddles.

They did not gain upon the savages, but succeeded in maintaining their distance between. It was an exciting chase, and lasted for several minutes, when our friend's canoe glided into that wilderness of reeds that grew far out into the water along the southern side of the lake.

Under this cover they entertained little fear of being found by the cunning Sioux, nevertheless, they lost no time in working their way into the heart of the miniature forest. They struck into one of those passages, cut by the animals that made the reeds their haunts, and laying aside the paddle, they drew the canoe along by means of the reeds. In this manner they worked themselves through the intricate mazes of the wilderness for several minutes, when they halted to listen.

But all was silent as desolation with the single exception of the gentle rustling of the reeds in the soft night-wind.

"What shall we do, boys?" asked Harry Thomas; "go on, or remain here?"

"We will probably be as safe here as anywhere," replied Burt Stanley.

"Very likely," replied another. "The whole Indian nation seems congregated around this lake."

"Yes, and I am afraid our old friend Solitary, and detective Dart have got into trouble," said young Thomas. "I heard a rifle-shot, and a fearful yelling around on the north side of the lake awhile ago."

"Rest assured Old Solitary will take care of himself, but as to Dart, I—"

"Sh! sh!" cautioned young Thomas; "hark! listen!"

Each one bent his head and listened intently. They started. Somewhere within that forest of reeds they could hear a canoe raking through one of those narrow thoroughfares. The sound was so faint they could not tell the direction whence it came, but as the canoe came nearer—as they knew it was by the increased sound—they found it was approaching from the south.

Their first impulse was to flee, but calm reflection convinced them that it would only hazard their situation, for they could not pass through the reeds without creating a noise that would be sufficient to direct the movements of the foe. Moreover, they would be just as apt to run into danger as to run from it, and so they concluded to remain where they were.

The prow of their canoe was headed westward, and just before it, crossing its course at right-angles, ran one of those passages made by the otters. It was wider than most of them, and the flags above failing to meet, a narrow belt of moonlight defined the course of the passage along the surface of the water. There was quite a patch of light lying on the water where the two trails crossed, and this was not over five feet from the prow of our friends' canoe. Any object crossing this could be plainly seen, while the hunters were concealed within the impenetrable shadows.

The raking sound produced by the approaching canoe, convinced our friends that it was coming up the wide, moonlit passage, crossing at their prows.

They listened intently for some sound that would tell them whether the canoe contained friends or foes. But they could hear nothing save the raking of the reeds against the sides of the craft.

They felt in hopes it was Old Solitary, though

they had little upon which to maintain these hopes. For the canoe was evidently a large one, and was, judging from the slowness with which it moved, heavily loaded.

Our friends awaited its approach in breathless suspense. There was not a doubt now, but that it would pass along the moonlit trail; for already they could see tiny waves dashing across the patch of light before them, and could hear them creeping among the stalks like wriggling serpents.

Every moment they expected it to burst upon their view, for now it was so close that Harry Thomas, who sat nearest the passage, was sure he heard a sound like a suppressed sob.

At length the prow of the craft came slowly into view, as did also the hands and arms of a savage, who was reaching forward, hand-over-hand, and drawing the canoe along by means of the reeds. As more of the canoe came in view, it showed the savage was standing up. Behind him sat two other warriors with their backs to their course, and between these two, and two others that sat in the stern of the boat, were Ethel Leland and Millie Fayville locked in each other's embrace and sobbing bitterly.

They were helpless captives!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SECRET OF THE HAWTHORN.

CAPTAIN ROLAND DISBROWE went on with his "military" preparations about the settlement, manifesting no uneasiness over what he had seen and heard. In fact, no one could have told his heart was in a tumult of emotions, and that his spirit was chafing in bitter suspense.

He thought the sun never would go down, so anxious was he to know what secret the hawthorn back of the Crystal Spring would hold for Ethel. But when the sun had finally set, the captain stole out into the openings, and by a circuitous route reached the Crystal Spring.

Forthwith he went to the hawthorn, and in the crotch of the numerous limbs that put out he found a small folded paper.

With an eager, triumphant flash of the eyes he clutched the paper and vanished from the spot. Out in the openings where the shadows were not so deep, he stopped, unfolded the paper, and read:

"Ethel, my darling, Heaven still favors me. But one more link is wanted in the chain of evidence to prove my innocence."

"Your suffering, yet affectionate
HUSBAND."

"Great God!" burst from Disbrowe's lips. His face grew deathly pale, and his hand trembled violently. "Husband!" he hissed, between his set teeth, "is it possible that Ethel Leland has a husband? Surely not! But this paper is evidence to that effect. Curse the luck! am I to lose Woldcain Hights after years of faithful labor? No, no, I shall not—I will not be defeated; by the gods of Olympus! I will not! Ay, ay, Jabez Dart! I see into your pretended search for the Hart's Ford murderer. It is the heir to Woldcain that you are hunting, but you may yet fail."

There was something in the tone as well as the looks of the speaker, that implied a secret resolve—a murderous threat.

For a moment he stood, as if undecided in his course, but at length he turned, and retracing his steps to the spring, put the paper back in the crotch of the hawthorn.

"Now," he muttered to himself, "I must find out whether Waucosta, the Sioux chief, escaped the Monster of the Lake or not."

He returned to his stable, and procuring his fleetest horse, the next minute he was mounted and flying westward like the wind.

"Millie, will you not take a walk with me to the Crystal Spring?"

"Of course I will, sweet sister; but why not go down to the brook? Will it not be a more pleasant walk?"

"It would be, Millie, but, then, I have an errand down to the spring."

"Then we will go there, Ethel, but we must not stay long for there may be danger about."

The sisters each threw a light shawl hoodlike over her head, and leaving the house, walked briskly down toward the spring.

It was now almost dark, and that fear and uneasiness which seems so consonant with the gloom of night took possession of the maidens. They started at every sound and shrunk closer to each other with fear.

At length they reached the spring, and going to the hawthorn, Ethel took therefrom the missive that Captain Disbrowe had read a few minutes before.

A cry of joy burst involuntarily from her lips.

"What is it, Ethel? what is the matter?" asked Mildred.

"Oh, sister!" she exclaimed, holding out the paper in her hand, "that paper has either good news or bad for me!"

"Who put it there, sister?"

"Detective Dart."

"Then it is from him?"

"It may, and it may not be. But, sister, I will read it; then I will break to you a secret that will no doubt startle you."

Ethel opened the paper, and by the few lingering rays of light managed to read it.

Another cry burst from her lips. It was a cry of infinite joy.

"Oh, Millie," she said, "my future life promises to be joyous!"

"As the wife of Captain Roland Disbrow?" asked Millie, with a merry laugh.

"No, no, Millie; I will never marry Roland Disbrow."

"Why not?"

"Because I am a wife already."

"What?" exclaimed Millie, "you a wife already? You are jesting, Ethel."

"I am not. Five years ago, when I was seventeen, Frank Hammond and I were married by Parson White in secret. Those that witnessed our marriage were all sworn friends of Frank's, and they promised to keep the whole matter a secret until Maurice Fayville, our dear father, Millie, would sanction the union; for you know he did not like Frank, for their existed an old family feud between the Hammonds and Fayvilles."

"Yes, yes, Ethel: I see now why you have been so sad-hearted ever since the Hart's Ford murder, and why you have not married Disbrow."

"That is the reason, Millie. I knew Frank was still alive somewhere. At least I thought so, and that is why I kept putting Roland Disbrow off. But at last, with crushed hopes, I promised, in a moment of desperation, to become his wife. But that promise will never be fulfilled. My darling Frank lives, and may soon come to me!"

"But will Detective Dart not arrest him for the murder of Henry Hohn?"

"No, Dart is Frank's best friend, and he is going to bring a terrible piece of villainy to light soon—something concerning the Hart's Ford murder, and which will clear Frank of the crime."

"If Frank was innocent, Ethel, why did he flee from the law?"

"Because he had a secret enemy, who implicated him in the murder by a cunning trap, and this same enemy was prepared to swear him to the gallows. Frank knew it, and fled, feeling satisfied that time would put every thing aright."

"Did Frank know who that enemy of his was?"

"No. Nor do I. But Detective Dart does, but would not tell me. But, then, Millie, I have suspected who the person is."

"Indeed, sister? Who?"

"I believe it is—"

She did not finish the sentence, for there was a rush of feet behind them, blankets were thrown over their heads, stifling their cries; then they felt themselves lifted aloft in strong arms and borne swiftly away.

They were captives, and their captors were painted and plumed Indian warriors.

CHAPTER XVII.

A FEARFUL ENCOUNTER.

WHEN Harry Thomas saw the savages pass within five feet of him with his darling little Mildred a captive, he could scarcely restrain the emotions of agony that arose in his breast. In fact, the feelings of all were aroused to the highest pitch of excitement and fear, for the presence of the two women there told them that the savages had been at Mound Prairie, and had, in all probability, destroyed the settlement.

"What shall we do, boys?" asked young Thomas; "follow them and attempt the girls' rescue?"

"It will be useless, Harry, for there are scores of Indians within hailing distance of this spot. We will have to hunt up Old Solitary and let his superior judgment direct us in this matter. You see, if we were to attack them and be defeated, the girls' rescue will be hopeless, and if we should even be successful, we would be hunted down by others that would be

called to the spot by the sound of the conflict. If we knew exactly what we could do, then we might follow and attempt their rescue."

"Yes, yes, Burt, you are right," replied Harry; "but it is hard to sit still and see the red hellions carrying away innocent girls. And I am afraid, boys, Mound Prairie is in ashes and our friends all dead or taken captives."

While this conversation was going on, the captives were being conveyed further and further away. They wept until their eyes were red and swollen. Their hearts seemed utterly crushed, and they sobbed in each other's arms like children. After their capture they had been placed upon ponies and hurried rapidly away until the lake was reached. Here the animals were given over to a part of the savages, while the others took to the water. Their object in this, perhaps, was to throw any one disposed to follow them off the trail. By their hard ride the women had been nearly exhausted, and it seemed to them as though they would never survive the hardships of that night.

The savage that was piloting the canoe, with the captives, through the forest of reeds, permitted the craft to come to a stand when a few rods past the young hunters.

They all listened, as only savages can listen, without breathing or moving a muscle. They heard nothing, but from their actions one would judge they suspected the presence of danger within the reeds. If this was the case, they must have drawn their inference from the deathlike stillness that hung over the lake at this juncture, for not even the rustle of a reed, nor chirp of an insect could be heard.

When the savage pilot had ceased listening he turned and held a short consultation with his companions regarding their future course. This point decided upon, he arose and taking his position turned the prow of his canoe westward into another passage. Their object in making this deviation could only have been to keep within that forest of reeds, for had they continued on northward they would soon have debouched into the open lake.

They dragged on a few rods when they suddenly shot into a little moonlit glade, probably a rod in diameter. This spot seemed to have been the central grounds of the otter, for, from its circle, more than a score of trails diverged in all directions through the reeds.

To the surprise of the savages, the instant they shot into the opening, another canoe containing two occupants, emerged so suddenly into the place from an opposite direction that the two collided with such force as to throw the savage pilot headlong into the water.

Great confusion prevailed within the savages' boat. Every one of its occupants was thrown from his and her seat. Ethel and Millie were the first to regain their feet, and, turning, they glanced at the stranger craft.

A cry of joy burst from their lips, for in it they saw Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper, and an Indian, whom they knew must be a friendly.

It was Lone Heart.

From their movements it was readily perceived that the old trapper and his red companion was prepared for the collision. In fact, they had seen the savages approaching along the moonlit passage with the captives and had brought about the collision on purpose to create confusion among the savages. Having succeeded in accomplishing their object, they lost no time in availing themselves of the advantage gained thereby; and rising to their feet, they sprung from their own canoe into that of the red-skins, and made a desperate assault upon them.

Lone Heart brained the savage pilot while he was endeavoring to climb back into the canoe, while Old Solitary brought into use no other weapon than his sledge-hammer fist. This he drove into the faces of the savages with as much force, almost, as though it had been a missile thrown by a catapult, fairly doubling the red-skins, and sending them whirling overboard into the lake.

Owing to the shock of the collision and the rocking of the canoe, the savages had not been enabled to regain their feet nor to strike a single blow, and in less time than it takes to write it, the canoe was cleared of every savage, and the terrified captives rescued.

Those of the red-skins that escaped Lone Heart's tomahawk after Solitary's fist had sent them overboard, sought safety in a hasty retreat among the reeds.

But, scarcely had the conflict ended when another canoe was heard crashing through the reeds toward them, and the next minute it shot

into the opening with half a dozen fierce-looking savages aboard of it.

A terrific war-whoop burst from their lips when they saw whom they confronted, but, scarcely had its intonations died on the air, when a fourth canoe made its appearance within the little opening. There were five occupants within it, and a shout of triumph burst from old Solitary's lips when he saw they were Harry Thomas and his companions!

Then with a sudden leap, the old trapper sprung from the canoe in which he stood, and landed in the lake within half an arm's length of the savages' canoe.

Half a dozen tomahawks were raised aloft to brain the trapper, but before they could descend he grasped the canoe by the gunwale and tilting it from him precipitated every warrior into the lake.

Now began a desperate struggle in the water, the young settlers coming into the fray. The savages rallied and engaged the whites without attempting to climb back into their canoe. Old Solitary again brought his iron fist into play, while the settlers with clubbed rifles ran their canoe into the midst of the combatants and began to play right and left.

The next moment the air was filled with flying spray, savage yells, the dull, sodden sound of blows and the plashing of water; and, too, the ring and clash of steel, the shrieks of the wounded, the gasping of strangling savages, and the roar of Old Solitary's lion voice made the moment a fearful one.

The conflict lasted scarcely two minutes. The savages were defeated and driven away into the reeds, while, with a shout of triumph, Old Solitary threw himself into one of the deserted canoes, an act which required great skill and agility.

But where was Lone Heart? where were Ethel and Mildred? They were nowhere within the glade.

"Ay!" exclaimed Old Solitary, "Lone Heart, the Chippewa has made good his escape with the weemen. Come, lads, follow me and we'll soon find 'em— Ah, there goes the Chippewa's call now!"

Old Solitary headed the canoe westward and entered one of the narrow trails. He was closely followed by the settlers, and in a few minutes they had cleared the forest of reeds and were coasting along the western shore.

A few minutes' journeying in this direction and the old trapper turned the prow of his canoe toward the bank, and parting some heavy foliage before him, disappeared from sight. The young settlers followed his example, and the next instant found themselves within a dark, subterranean passage of water extending back under the bank. Guided by the dip of Old Solitary's paddle they followed on, and on, rounding a slight angle in the passage the glow of fire burst suddenly upon their view.

It was burning on the ground where the passage led up out of the water by what seemed a pair of rude steps. It was at the head of these steps where the fire was burning, and within its light our friends saw three persons. Two of them were females, the other an Indian warrior. The former were seated near the fire, while the latter was standing near the head of the steps, his plumed head bent in the attitude of listening.

As they drew nearer the fire our friends saw that the females were Ethel Leland and Mildred Fayville, and their companion, the Chippewa Lone Heart.

A minute more and they had landed and joined the trio, their meeting being attended with great joy and happiness.

A few minutes later another person was added to the party.

It was Jabez Dart, detective.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A RIFT OF SUNSHINE.

FROM the lips of Ethel the young hunters soon learned that Mound Prairie had not been attacked by savages up to the time of their capture, and from Jabez Dart they learned that there were no apprehensions of an attack being made. How Dart had obtained this information they were at a loss to know, for they were entirely ignorant of his having been to Mound Prairie since their separation on the east side of the lake.

During their conversation, it was noticed by more than one that Lone Heart's eyes were almost constantly feasting, with a strange expression in their dark depths, upon the fair, sad face of Ethel Leland. Ethel caught his glances more than once, but she experienced no uneasiness

for she accorded his action to that open admiration so characteristic of the Indian.

After a while Old Solitary and Dart stepped aside and conversed a few minutes in an undertone. On rejoining the party the old trapper said:

"Friends, we're not entirely safe here, for the skulkin' red-skins are thick as bees about this lake. Now, me and Lone Heart are goin' out to make a scout. We may be back in an hour and we may not, but of all you do, keep a close watch out at the mouth of the cave."

"We'll do it, Solitary," said Dart.

The old trapper and the Chippewa descended the rude steps and entered a canoe, and the next minute they were lost from view in the darkness of the watery cavern.

But Stanley was sent to the entrance to keep guard until they came back, while our friends in the cavern seated themselves composedly about the fire, and entered into a discussion of the dangers and troubles of the night.

Jabez Dart was unusually communicative, and when Lone Heart came in as a feature of their conversation, he said:

"I've been in this cavern before, friends. It's the home of Lone Heart, the Chippewa. He's got a snug little parlor back in one of the chambers, where he sleeps, cooks and so on. He came here five years ago, I think, under the most trying circumstances, and thereby hangs a tale which I'll tell you just to kill time while the trapper and the Chippewa are out."

"Yes, certainly; tell it by all means, Dart," said Harry Thomas, who was seated by Millie's side on the opposite side of the fire.

"Well," began Dart assuming an attitude of ease, "about six years ago a young man, whom I will call Dick, at present, was traveling in Europe. Now Dick was a wayward youth and not altogether strictly honest. He was ambitious, and yet given to gambling and so forth. Now, Dick was in the South of Scotland, when he learned of the decease of the last of the lineal descendants of the grand old estate—well, I will call it Bonny Lassie. Who would now inherit Bonny Lassie? was the question, for the last proprietor had died without making a will. But, upon looking over some of the family records, it was found that, some twenty years previous, a young man whom I will dub Scott, emigrated to America, he being a distant relative of the house of Bonny Lassie, and so he would fall heir to the estate."

"But, who knew whether Scott was in America or Greenland? or whether he was alive at all?"

"Well, Dick, our American tourist, heard of all this hubbub about Bonny Lassie and Scott, the heir. As luck would have it, he knew exactly where Scott was in America—he was acquainted with him, and the devil took possession of his heart, and he resolved to make a fortune out of his knowledge—if not, indeed, obtain possession of Bonny Lassie. So straightway he went to those whom the law had appointed to administer on the estate, and told them a very systematic falsehood. He told them he believed he knew where Scott was, and offered to hunt him up and send him forthwith to take possession of Bonny Lassie. Of course, the apparently learned and gentlemanly American tourist was intrusted with this mission."

"Dick returned post-haste to America, and found that Scott and his wife were both dead, but they had a lovely daughter—whom I'll call Margery—living, and who, of course, was next heir to Bonny Lassie. Instead of Dick telling Margery of her foreign wealth, he set to work to win her affections and marry her, so that he could share her fortune with her, and no telling what crime lurked back of this resolve. But the scamp had a rival to contend with. Margery had a lover, whom I'll call Jack, for short. Dick resolved not to give up such a glorious chance for a rich wife, and so, with three accomplices, he concocted a wicked affair which I will call The Tragedy. The consequence was, Jack had to leave the country, and this left the field clear for Dick to win Margery's love. But Margery wasn't so easily won as the rascal anticipated, and for five years he has been laying siege to the invulnerable barrier of her heart."

"Humph!" exclaimed Harry; "I would think the Bonny Lassie administrators would get tired waiting his return with the heir."

"That is the point to which I had just come," continued Dart. "One of Dick's accomplices in The Tragedy got shot in a drunken brawl in New York, about a year ago, and, while dying, he put me in possession of the story which I've narrated to you. So I went to Scotland and traced the Bonny Lassie matter up to this lake. You see, Jack, after The Tragedy, fled the coun-

try, came West, and took up his abode in this cavern."

"And now you're after him, eh?"

"No; I have come to establish his innocence in The Tragedy, and in order that you may understand me better, I will be more explicit in the names of the parties connected with my story. To begin with, the Scotland estate is known as Woldeairn Hights; Dick, the American tourist, and rascal, you know as Captain Roland Disbrowe, and—"

An exclamation of surprise burst from the lips of some of the party, at mention of the last name.

"And," continued Dart, "the heir to the Hights, whom we have called Scott, was named Robert Leland, and his daughter Margery is none other than she who sits before you—Ethel Leland."

Another cry of surprise burst from the lips of all the party except Ethel's. She had already been made acquainted with Disbrowe's nefarious designs by the detective.

"Well," continued Dart, "The Tragedy was known to you all in Ohio as the Hart's Ford murder, and Jack, the inhabitant of this cave, was Frank Hammond, who was accused of the supposed murder."

"Supposed murder?" exclaimed Harry; "then there was no murder done at Hart's Ford?"

"No. It was a 'put up thing.' Disbrowe hired Hank Hohn, the supposed murdered man, to leave the country, and then he had two more to swear in court that they saw Hammond murder Hohn."

"But there was a body found that was identified as Hohn's, by the peculiar suit he always wore," said one of the party to whom the Hart's Ford murder was well known.

"Oh, yes, certainly," replied Dart, "but the rascals robbed the grave for the body. You doubtless remember about that time one James Cross was crushed in a canal lock. It was his body, as the dying accomplice said, that was taken from the grave, dressed in Hohn's clothes, and taken to the river near Hart's Ford."

"Then this cavern is Frank Hammond's retreat?"

"Yes."

"I would like to see Frank," said Harry; "where is he now?"

"You have already seen him," said Dart; "he went out with Old Solitary. Lone Heart, the Chippewa, is Frank Hammond."

A cry burst from Ethel's lips. This much to her had been unknown. She had seen Lone Heart, yet his Indian disguise had been effectual, even to her eyes.

To the whole party the story was quite apparent now, and they had again begun its discussion, when a shout from the guard at the entrance came rolling through the cavern.

"Come, come, every one of you!" exclaimed Dart; "we must leave here—quick!"

Without adding a word, the party followed the detective to the foot of the steps, to the water's edge, where they embarked for the mouth of the cavern. Arrived there, they ran alongside of Stanley, the guard, and Dark asked:

"What's the matter?"

"Look! look!" replied Stanley, pointing out upon the moonlit lake.

Every eye was turned in the direction indicated, and first saw a canoe with two occupants flying with great speed across the lake. The occupants were Indians. They were Waucosta and Great Wolf, and as they sped on over the lake they glanced back ever and anon with apparent terror, and well they might; for close behind, in hot pursuit of them, was the Monster of the Lake!

A cry of horror burst from the lips of Ethel and Mildred, but Jabez Dart assured them there was nothing to fear.

The Monster doubled on the savages at every stroke of its wing-like fins, and suddenly its sharp breast struck the stern of the canoe, pitching it forward on its beam-ends, and throwing the savages out into the water.

Then the Monster came to a halt, and the next moment our friends saw the head and shoulders of a man appear out of the back of the dragon! A loud, triumphant laugh came echoing across the water as the man continued to rise from out the Monster, until the full proportions of a large man were visible. A rifle was in his hands, and no sooner did his eyes catch sight of the struggling savages than he raised the weapon and fired. The sullen boom of the piece, mingled with the death-wail of Great Wolf, came over the water. Then the man assumed a position astride of the Monster,

which tacked about and darted toward Waucosta, who was endeavoring to climb into his canoe.

"Surrender, Waucussy!" yelled the man aboard the Monster; "surrender, or you shall die!"

Waucosta heeded not his words, but strove harder than ever to get into his canoe. But the next instant the dragon ran alongside of him, a pair of strong hands grasped the chief, lifted him from the water and threw him across the back of the Monster, thereby rendering him perfectly helpless.

"Ho, for the cavern, Spirit of the Monster!" shouted Waucosta's captor, "to feed your ghoul's jaws on Waucosta's flesh."

The Monster turned and started directly toward the mouth of the cavern where our friends were.

"Oh, it is coming here!" cried Millie, in the greatest fear.

"Let it come, Millie," replied Dart; "the Monster of the Lake is nothing but a cunningly-concocted boat. But let us hasten back to the fire, for those aboard the Monster are our friends, and they have a prisoner."

The party turned and hastened back to the fire. They had scarcely landed when the light of the camp-fire showed them the Monster approaching along the channel, and astride of its back was Old Solitary, with Waucosta lying before him a prisoner.

"We've got the beauty, boys," shouted the old trapper. "Jist step down and take charge of him. The paint's all washed from his countenance, and you'll readily recognize the critter."

Dart and two of the hunters stepped down to the water's edge as the Monster came to the landing, and took the prisoner in charge.

No sooner did Dart's eyes fall upon his face, from which the paint had been washed, than he exclaimed:

"Yes, sir! it's my man, Hank Hohn! Friends, this proves that the Hart's Ford murder was all a farce, and Frank Hammond is an innocent man, for here we have the supposed murdered man."

"I've known that these five years," returned Hohn, the renegade chief, Waucosta, with a defiant leer; "the captain gave me a nice sum to leave the diggin's, and comin' west, I got in among the red-skins and got to be a big bug 'mong 'em. Now, do what you please with me, gentlemen, if you think I'm guilty of crime."

"Never mind your gab now, Hohn; I'll tend to your case," replied Dart.

At this juncture, Ethel, who had been watching the Monster with a kind of fascination, saw its back part, as if upon hinges, and the form of Lone Heart appear from the opening.

A cry burst from her lips, and she started toward him, for now she could see that Lone Heart was her darling Frank Hammond!

CHAPTER XIX.

SUNSHINE AT LAST.

WE will not attempt to describe the joy of the young couple on their meeting after five years' cruel separation, but will leave it to the minds of the readers, who could not infer otherwise but that it was a happy reunion.

The party spent the remainder of the night there in the cavern, and during this time the Monster of the Lake received a thorough investigation by Dart and the young settlers.

They found it to be a canoe ingeniously contrived, the greater part being under the water. The hold, or cabin, was large enough for three men, and rendered perfectly water-proof. The oars were made of thick canvas, fastened to a frame, and so arranged that when reaching forward for a new stroke they would close like the web-foot of a fowl, then, when they made their stroke against the water, they would spread out like sails filled with wind. This enabled the operator to make the forward reach under the water without retarding the motion of the boat. The canoe was entered from the back, which opened on both sides, but the figure-head of the craft elicited the most curiosity from those engaged in its examination.

"Say, Hammond," Dart finally said, "is this figure-head some of your own handiwork?"

"No," responded Hammond; "it is the work of a race of people that, for all I know, existed a thousand years ago."

"I thought it had an ancient look about it. Where'd you find it? Come, tell us all about where you got it."

"In this cavern. Five years ago I camped on the prairie in a fearful snow-storm, within two hundred yards of this lake. During the night a savage, wrapped in a complete sheet of snow, approached my camp, as I supposed, to get my

scalp. I rushed into my tent to get my revolver when I discovered his presence. He followed me, and we grappled in the tent. We fell heavily to the ground, which had been thawed out by my fire, and which gave way, and we fell though into this cavern. The fall frightened the savage, and he relinquished his notion of my scalp, escaped from the cavern, and, the joke of it was, *fled on my horse*. Curiosity took possession of me as soon as I had recovered from the excitement of the moment, and I resolved to explore this cavern. I soon found it was the tomb of some extinct race, for I found many skeletons in a half-preserved state, and I also found one form, reposing in a niche in the wall, in a state natural as life; in fact, so life-like that I thought it a living being asleep there, but, when I advanced and touched it, it crumbled to dust. I went on and found that figure-head and the lower half of the craft to which it is now attached. At first I thought it a living monster, for the wavering light of my torch gave it a lifelike quiver. But, on closer investigation, I found it was but a canoe. From this I knew there must be water near by, and followed on until I came to this very spot. I then returned to my tent, and spent the remainder of the night shivering by the fire. When day dawned I discovered this lake and the forest on the north side of it, and resolved to take up my quarters here. I soon after met with Old Solitary, and, making a confidant of him, told him why I was here. He seemed to believe my story, and we became greatly attached to each other. He suggested the idea of turning into a Chippewa, and named me Lone Heart, a very appropriate name. He assisted me to construct the Monster of the Lake, in order to make the place a terror to Indians, so that they would not trouble me, nor trespass on his hunting-grounds. The idea worked like a charm, and I must say Old Solitary has been a true friend to me. Several times he has brought me papers from the Mississippi, in hopes that, through that medium, I might hear something of my friends, or of my innocence being proven in the Hart's Ford murder. About six months ago, however, I was scouting with Old Solitary in the woods north of here, when, to my surprise, I saw the man whom I was accused of murdering! Straightway I had my friend, Solitary, to carry a letter, signed 'Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper,' and directed to Jabez Dart, N., Ohio, to the nearest postal station. In the note the detective was notified that, by applying to the writer at Silver Lake, he would receive some light in regard to the Hart's Ford murder.

"The letter brought Dart to the lake, and—well, the rest you know. The capture of Hank Hohn establishes my innocence. Still, had I not pursued the course I did, the villains would have had me hung long ago. They made the case so plain against me, that, though I was innocent, it would be death to stay within reach of the law."

"By Heaven!" exclaimed Burt Stanley, "Disbrowe ought to be hung, the mean villain."

"Humph!" sneered Hohn, who had heard the whole of Frank Hammond's story. "You needn't trouble your brains about Disbrowe. If you'd taken the trouble to look at Great Wolf's belt, you'd seen the captain's scalp there. He was nosin' around the lake, to-night, and got his pass with a tomahawk in his cussed brain. He deserved it, too, for he tried to kill me, t'other night."

"Yas, edzactly," replied Old Solitary; "I heard your fuss and saw the captain toss you into the lake. It's a good thing you escaped death there, for the gallows would been cheated outen one bird."

But one more mystery stands to be explained. The reader has doubtless wondered how Old Solitary escaped the night he was encircled with fire and savages on the peninsula. There was a cavern under the very spot where he stood. A large moss-covered stone concealed a small opening leading down into it, and when the fire concealed the trapper's form from the savages' eyes, Lone Heart pushed the stone away and cut his friend's bonds. Then both escaped down into the cavern, and the stone was replaced over the opening.

At daylight our friends all took up their line of march toward Mound Prairie, where they arrived on the evening of the same day, safe and sound, amid shouts of joy. They found a party just getting ready to go in search of Ethel and Mildred.

Jabez Dart remained a few days at the settlement, and when he went East, Frank Hammond and his wife accompanied him.

Ethel had no trouble in establishing her right to the Woldcain Heights estate in Scotland. But having no desire of living there, she sold the property at an immense price, and invested the money in American securities. She did not forget Jabez Dart, however, and gave him for his invaluable services in her behalf, a handsome fortune.

We never heard what became of Hank Hohn, but hope he met with his just dues.

Mound Prairie was troubled no more with Indians. It flourished and grew into a happy and prosperous settlement.

Old Solitary, the Hermit Trapper, continued to hunt and trap a few years longer about Silver Lake; but game at last became so scarce that he was compelled to move into new quarters, and away up in the Far North Woods, we may hear from him again, dear reader.

THE END.

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